



Intelligence Squared – S. Dana Wolfe’s Words to the Wise

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by **Marti Sichel**

With an extensive background in politics and an eclectic résumé to impress any mover and shaker—including a handful of Emmy awards won during her time at ABC News Nightline and a highly respected NPR show, Intelligence Squared U.S. journalist and producer S. Dana Wolfe talks education, politics, and how women may be predisposed to getting ahead.



Some jobs are simple and provide a small sense of accomplishment. Some are difficult and last far longer than we would ever want them to. The job of improving ourselves and our world is a lifelong goal. It’s not easy, but comes with the greatest sense of accomplishment. It’s like playing a game in which the rules are always changing and we can never stop adjusting. One woman who really takes this idea to heart is journalist, producer, and The Rosenkranz Foundation and Intelligence Squared U. S. Foundation executive director S. Dana Wolfe.

Born and raised in Vancouver, B.C., Wolfe first moved away from the West Coast to spend a year studying at Tel Aviv University. Without really knowing where she wanted her studies to lead, she signed up for all sorts of courses, but never taking any one in particular more seriously than any other. She completed her year and decided to live on the East Coast, so she picked up and moved to Toronto to study at York University.

At York, Dana was introduced to the subtle complexities of political science and history, two subjects that captured her attention and would start her on her twisting and turning path to becoming an award-winning journalist. “Current events, current affairs, economics...I studied all of that. I never had the obvious intention of going into journalism, but I think my studies led me in that direction.”

With one degree under her belt, Dana followed her passion south to NYU, where she earned a master's degree in International Relations. For two years while working on her degree, she was also part of the team at the Permanent Mission of Israel to the United Nations. "I was very fortunate in that I started off as an intern in the Israel's mission to the U.N. At that time, Bibi (Benjamin) Netanyahu was the charismatic representative from Israel. Meeting him at the time of my life when I did, I was fortunate to carry that relationship, and those with the people I met in the foreign affairs area of the Israeli government, into my future positions."

Dana soon moved deeper into the political arena—here both geographically and professionally speaking—taking a place in Washington, D.C. to work for the influential "godfather of Neo-Conservatism," Irving Kristol. After twenty years publishing the successful quarterly journal, *The Public Interest*, Kristol had just spun off a foreign policy journal, *The National Interest*. Dana spent two years working there as an assistant managing editor, editing articles and manuscripts from contributing writers on topics like U.S. foreign policy, political theory and petrol economics. Working directly with Kristol, Wolfe found herself not only her first strictly editorial job, but also a mentor.

Dana decided to change gears again. She moved back to Canada to pursue a career in a completely different medium: television. She found a home at CTV News at Canada AM, similar to *Good Morning America*. There was no learning curve at CTV; Dana was thrown into production immediately. "I didn't know the difference between the different kinds of cameras or tapes or edits or anything and I was immediately sent out to cover stories—not on-air, but as a producer."

It was in this crucible of fast-paced news production and delivery that Dana met three impressive women who would become not only instructors and mentors, but also dear friends. They were colleagues Wendy Freeman, who is the current CTV News president, Pamela Wallin, a former journalist and diplomat (and Canadian senator) who co-hosted Canada AM, and her boss, CTV News and Canada AM executive producer Wendy Day.

It was an incredibly productive and educational experience. Dana learned not only the ins and outs of delivering news, but how important it is in business—any business—to form and maintain strong connections. It was a short stint, only 14 months from start to finish, but she was able to look to these three powerful, intelligent women and glean from them what she needed to know to become a success herself. And even though she left CTV News over two decades ago, those bonds have held strong. "Being a woman, moving up the career ladder—it's all about the power of your network. It's all about you being a success in the workplace, starting relationships early on in your career and maintaining those relationships. Colleagues, sources, contacts; over the years it has been helpful from a career perspective, gratifying from both a personal and a professional perspective, and it's valuable in your life. If you are a natural collector of friends and contacts, and many women do that naturally, well, you need to know that those relationships are valuable and you need to know how they can open doors or make connections or offer insights in the future."

After her CTV News training, Dana went to the long-form network news show ABC News *Nightline*, where she spent 12 years as a producer, picking up multiple Emmy Awards along the way. She traveled

all over the world, but remained particularly interested in stories about the Middle East. Whether covering events like the aftermath of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination or the inner workings of highly debated peace talks, Dana found herself in rooms with all the big political players—no small thing for a young and up-and-coming journalist. “And I was at *Nightline*; I was working with the best of the best.”

If she were to offer one piece of advice to other women, one key to her success, it's to make sure you're as well-rounded as you can be. “I tell young people who say ‘I want to become a television producer, a writer, an editor’ to study something other than journalism. If you want to be a journalist, you need to know a little about a lot. You need to know whatever your area of expertise is going to be, those areas you're going to be covering. It's better to learn those types of things than the journalism side because that will come. You'll either be a good writer or you won't be a good writer. You'll be a good shooter or you won't be a good shooter. It's a matter of learning all of these other things that you can then bring to the table—not just a degree, but the ability to say ‘I know X, Y and Z, and you can throw me into these types of situations because I will thrive. These are the things I've learned and the experiences I've had,’ rather than just, ‘I've learned how to do it.’ You'll find out if you have a natural knack for these things.”

Sometimes, however, there are things you can prepare down to the smallest detail that still don't work out the way you planned. She tells the story of an interviewee she befriended, a UN Hostage negotiator who would be sent into Lebanon to negotiate with Hezbollah and occasionally return with freed hostages. “He was a very secretive, very low-key guy who traveled in pretty serious circles. I spent two years working with him. I finally got him to agree to sit down and talk with [*Nightline* anchor] Ted Koppel on camera to tell us some of the behind-the-scenes stories. I flew with him to Washington, I got him on the set, I knew the stories he told me, and we were ready to talk about them...and he totally clammed up on air. It was a disaster. That taught me a lesson about what can happen. It is the real world and sometimes someone says what they can do and they don't do it. But that's the news business.”

In Wolfe's experience, however, there were far fewer failures than successes. Work continued to be a source of incredible learning and insight. “I was privy to a lot of fly-on-the-wall conversations over the years, in rooms with (Yasser) Arafat and Rabin and (Hosni) Mubarak and different heads of state. It was fascinating to see how diplomacy was done behind the scenes, to see what they were willing to say in an interview versus what they were willing to say in the background or off the record. People were very careful, and you agreed ahead of time what they would say and what they wouldn't say and I don't think that's different today.” She adds: “It's also important to know other languages. It's important when you're a fly on the wall and you hear people talking to each other in their native languages.”

So how does one go from being a top producer at a national news show to being a top producer for one of National Public



Radio's most intellectually driven broadcasts? For Dana, it started at home.

"After *Nightline* I took a few months off thinking I would take a year to have a break after 12 pretty grueling years. I had children and wanted to know what it was like to drive a carpool, to garden, to keep an up-to-date address book."

The domestic respite lasted only a few months. After the events of 9/11 she jumped back into the fray, going to work part-time as an executive media consultant. After a few more years of doing different things for different companies, the urge to return to work full-time returned. So what does a smart woman do when she wants something? She taps into her network, of course.

"The long and the short of it is: I sent three emails out to three friends—two in Washington and one in New York—that basically said 'It's the end of the year. I'm ready to go back to work at the beginning of the year. Let me know if you hear anything.' The following week I got an email from a friend, a former Nightliner, who said "I found you the perfect job."

That perfect job was helping businessman and philanthropist Robert Rosenkranz take his recent acquisition, the licensing rights to make an American version of the noted British program, *Intelligence Squared*, and build a new program from the ground up. "It was kind of serendipitous how I got to meet Robert and get *Intelligence Squared U.S.* up and running. We didn't have a website, a logo, a piece of stationery...anything." With the right set of skills and the right amount of determination (a lot), they got to work on the program that has been bringing together "the world's leading authorities on the day's most important issues" and sold-out audiences for eight years. That's no small feat considering how the Fairness Doctrine—that broadcasters have a responsibility to be honest, equitable and balanced—seems to be largely ignored across the board, with all of the large news outlets functioning with clear partisan agendas. "We're the only organization in this country that promotes Oxford-style debate. We show both sides of any topic we cover. "

As I write this, the team behind *Intelligence Squared U.S.* has produced more than 85 debates, with no sign of slowing or losing their curiosity. Or their edge. As one of the smartest sources for intellectualism and a bastion of open-minded discussion, Dana has seen time and again how important their program has been for the conscience and wellbeing of the people of the United States.

One debate in particular, "Ban College Football," got people talking across multiple platforms and became the epicenter of a mass media trend. When stories started coming out about young athletes with brain injuries and kids passing out on the field, it got people all over the country participating in the dialogue about school sports and their health-related consequences.

"When I look to see results or outcomes or did we make a difference, I can point to that debate." Guests Buzz Bissinger (author of *Friday Night Lights*, the book on which the very good series was based) and Malcolm Gladwell likened college football to dog fighting. "I don't think there was a sports media outlet in the U.S. that didn't cover that debate. The conversation was going on about brain injuries and concussions," she said.

“I saw an op-ed written by somebody in California months after that debate, saying ‘The reason why I cancelled my college football season tickets was because of *Intelligence Squared*.’ That’s when I know we can make a difference and we do. It allows people to hear a point of view that they normally would not hear. And you don’t have to agree with what you’re hearing; you have to be able to listen to it and say ‘Oh! There’s an important perspective from the other side.’ In this age of toxic punditry, we provide something different. When there’s a topic in the news, we jump on it and can have a really provocative, thoughtful debate that isn’t just about sound bytes.

“When you have an opportunity to speak to people on both sides, and hear their points of view, whether you end up using them, you’re still learning. I like that part of it.” Some of the debates even change the way their producers think. “We did a debate, ‘Too Many Kids Go to College,’ with Peter Thiel, who provides a scholarship and asks kids to not go to college. He tells them to go be an entrepreneur for a year, but don’t go to college. I have two kids in high school and I don’t think I thought of it that way. Many times one assumes everybody wants to go to college. Well, maybe college isn’t right for everybody.”

With all of her background in news and all of her enthusiasm for being a producer for radio, it’s no wonder she also gives off a strong educator impression. When asked if she sees her group and herself as having an educational responsibility, she schooled me with some impressive facts and figures about who tunes in.

“We are working on a number of different initiatives right now, and one of them is having our content being utilized in various educational platforms. Harvard contacted me and said ‘Two of our professor debated with you; can we use your video?’ So now we are thinking of ways to have our content be presented, whether to a high school audience or to teachers or a college audience. We have about 3,000 different educational institutions using our website every month. We know there’s a demand. Now we’re in the process of figuring out a digital strategy.”

With all of the demand for the kind of nonpartisan idea sharing that has made *Intelligence Squared U.S.* so popular with listeners, does she ever worry about competition from other companies or platforms? “We may have competition for the event property”—there are always dozens of events going on every night in New York and they all need a space—“but we don’t have competition with debate. And we want to see the debate go on on college campuses. The future leaders of our country are on college campuses and they need to learn about debate. Our mission is to educate and raise the level of public discourse in the U.S.”

With phones ringing and meetings to attend, it was time for Dana to get back to the hustle and bustle of the *Intelligence Squared U.S.* offices. But before she went, she had a few last pieces of advice: “You have to love what you do. You have to want to do what you do. You really have to want to learn and to take your product to another level. It’s those standard clichés: Follow your interest, do the hard work, work with people you like. And probably ‘Break the rules.’ I’m a big believer in that.”

Photos by Carla Boecklin