

Renard T. Jenkins: Advancing Innovation and Building Inclusivity Across Media Technology and the Allied Arts and Sciences

As SMPTE moves into 2023, Renard Jenkins advances into the role of SMPTE president, becoming the first African American to serve in that role over the organization's 100-year history. He jokes that things have come full circle over the past century, from one Jenkins to another. (SMPTE was founded in 1916 by Charles Frances Jenkins.) But for Jenkins himself (Renard, that is), the path has been anything but circular. He has long had a passion for creative technology, and it did not take long for him to find his way into the world of media and entertainment.

"My mother once said that when I was a kid, I either had a camera in my hand or was reading a book about something scientific," says Jenkins. "Always, one of those two things."

Beginnings

As a kid and into his teens, Jenkins spent most of his time reading about marine biology and watching "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau" whenever it came on television. When he went to college, his goal was to be a marine biologist. By the time Jenkins reached his junior year, he realized that every time he and his classmates went out on an expedition or dive, or did any sort of experiment, he was documenting it with his cameras or recorders. He came to understand that Jacques Cousteau shows had appealed to him so strongly not just because they document undersea exploration, but also because they blend the two things that he loves—the art and the science of visual storytelling.

He soon changed his major from marine biology to film, television, and radio communications and began working at the local PBS television station as a PA and local radio station as an on-air personality. Because there was a strong engineering component to both jobs, he was able to continue building those skills as well as his knowledge of the production side. Before he had finished his degree, Jenkins began freelance work in film and television. Earning his certification as a sound engineer, he got jobs with groups such as ESPN and ABC Sports covering professional golf, tennis, and college football and basketball. Being a young upstart, he eagerly took on opportunities to learn through production jobs or new types of projects that were not always appealing to some of his older, more experienced, and more established colleagues. He got a lot of work.

Jenkins loved the thrill of live sports and film production and the excitement that builds leading into every event or location shoot. Still in college but ready to graduate, he received offers from competing networks and production companies. Encouraged by his family to leave what had become lucrative freelance work for the stability and benefits plan a salaried job would provide, Jenkins accepted an offer from CNN and Turner Broadcasting. While the pay back then was nothing to write home about, the company's youthful "we can do anything" energy appealed to Jenkins. He supplemented his income by staying connected to and working in the burgeoning film, music, and music video production community that was rapidly growing in Atlanta during the 1990s.



Photo credit: Tim Mangini

He had planned to stay at CNN and Turner Broadcasting for only two years, but every six months to a year, he was promoted. And every promotion led to a fresh opportunity to stretch his technical knowledge. While he continued in creative roles, he earned new certifications and leaned into research and development. He moved on to being an editor in the pool, then to post-production editing, compositing, and graphics, and finally, to researching higher-end editorial tools and training others on how to use them. It was the early days for CNN in working with computer editing tools and a new-fangled product called *Avid*.

Next Steps

What happened next would become what Jenkins calls the turning point of his career. Howard Ginsburg from CNN's Research and Development Department noticed how intently the young man had listened in on meetings and taken notes. He invited Jenkins to come work with him on a few projects that were slated to advance CNN technologically beyond its competitors. After speaking with his manager Kevin Ivey, mentor Graylin Young and close friend in the business, Kenneth Strickland, Jenkins decided to take the opportunity to expand his knowledge while continuing his "day job."

Now working on the front end of new technologies being created by innovators such as Apple, Avid, Adobe, Sony, and others, he put fresh concepts into practice to see what they could do. He was encouraged to pursue research and development with the same maverick attitude for which Ted Turner and all of his companies were so well known.

“The thinking at that time that was instilled in all of us was, if this is something cutting edge ... even bleeding edge, something new and forward thinking, go check it out. Throw all of your efforts and resources into it to see if it will fly. If it does, great. If it doesn’t, take what you’ve learned and apply it to the next project. Dream big! No ideas were too crazy or too bold,” says Jenkins. “I always look at that as the turning point in the way that I thought about my career because it helped me to understand that, really and truly, the only limitations that you have, even in a giant corporation, are the ones that you put on yourself.”

In exploring new possibilities, Jenkins and his team helped the company accomplish numerous feats that were ahead of their time. He and the team rebuilt CNN’s post-production facility from scratch to make it the first HD-ready department in the company at that time. He not only designed workflows that utilized collaborative and seamless handoffs between three major editing applications forcing them into a single post-production environment, but he also wrote scripts and code that would combine them onto a single shared storage system. This was unheard of in the proprietary world of bespoke storage during the late 1990s.

This drive toward early innovation is what Jenkins aims to encourage at SMPTE, an organization he had once participated in at the behest of his college professor through his local student chapter. He believes that SMPTE, being a global organization, has the power to lead in the areas of standards and interoperability by partnering with

other organizations and building on collective strengths. And giving employees additional opportunities for career advancement.

Early innovation requires early education, and Jenkins envisions visiting middle and secondary schools and participating in science fairs, career interest workshops, and college job fairs. According to him, the average student is unaware of SMPTE, let alone the organization’s contribution to virtually every technology that people use to consume content. And when students do consider a career in content creation, they rarely think about the valuable work that happens behind the scenes. They are aware of high-profile roles but not of less visible but equally rewarding jobs that often result in more employment opportunities, career advancement, and diverse streams of income.

While getting people into the field presents its challenges, so too does supporting existing employees with the right tools and work environment. Jenkins discovered this for himself when he moved from CNN and Turner to PBS. It was not a direct move for him. After over a decade and a half of working at CNN and Turner, Jenkins had quite a few options. He spent several years in management at Discovery and TV One before being recruited to PBS, the home of his childhood favorites: Big Bird, Grover, and Kermit. It was a bit of a homecoming for him but on a much bigger stage.

Excelling

At PBS, Jenkins discovered the same kind of energy he had loved at CNN and Turner Broadcasting, and he enjoyed being surrounded by smart colleagues with a passion for their work, the organization, and its mission. But he also saw the need to build new tools on the technical side that would help employees experience less stress, be more efficient, and find more excitement in their everyday work.

“I use the scientific method in almost every decision I make,

whether it is what I am going to wear tomorrow, or what I’m going to work with my team to design for the future of this industry,” says Jenkins. “That’s how I got so involved with everything that I was doing at PBS.”

Before leaving CNN and Turner Broadcasting, Jenkins began studying *kaizen*, the Japanese word for “continuous improvement” and a business philosophy that aims to empower employees in their specialties and encourage them to make small, continuous changes to better the company overall. He found use cases of companies that had used *kaizen* to improve product manufacturing by increasing success rates and lowering defect rates (Toyota, Nikon, Canon, and Coca-Cola are the most notable). This is how Jenkins came to the idea—within his purview and areas of influence—of creating a media or content supply chain akin to a factory supply chain. He started to write and present thought leadership on this concept in 2009, again enjoying the science that went behind solving the industry’s many complexities.

Jenkins holds his then-manager, Stefan Petrat, previous manager David Shapiro, and mentor Tony Cole, in high esteem because they encouraged him to take a step back rather than becoming so hyper-focused on solving a problem that he could no longer see it clearly. While Shapiro and Cole provided Jenkins with external guidance and served as sounding boards, Petrat attempted to create an environment to make sure Jenkins and others felt as though they truly belonged.

“When you are the only person who looks like you in a lot of meetings and sometimes the first person who looks like you in leadership positions, you often don’t feel supported or even welcome,” says Jenkins. “Stefan made me feel welcome. Like an offensive lineman, he would clear the field for me and allow me to run with the ball. Now, as I continue growing as an executive, I want to do the

same thing for others. My management style is very much built on making sure that it's not about me; it's really about my teams and the greatness they bring to the table every single day."

Leadership

Jenkins is the first African American to serve as an officer for SMPTE and the first to be on the board of the Hollywood Professional Association, MovieLabs, and the UltraHD Forum. In these leadership roles, as in his day-to-day work as senior vice president, Production Integration & Creative Technology Services, Warner Bros. Discovery, Jenkins is more than a visible symbol that people of color do belong; he works with colleagues to ensure that these organizations actively support people of color, women, those with diverse abilities—and young employees, in particular—in being engaged and successful participants.

"I recognize and appreciate the significance of being the first African American across all these governing boards," says Jenkins. "But if I'm not using that platform to make things better, then it doesn't matter at all. I want to get to the point where it's normal to see an executive of Jamaican or African descent in a position of high-ranking authority in the technology sector of this industry—not only being in that position, but actually given the support and the authority to be successful and to effect positive change in that position. Those are the things that really resonate with me. I want that to be my legacy."

Jenkins heads several initiatives created to bring greater inclusivity to the field of media technology. He serves as chair of the WBD Technology and Operations Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Accessibility

Council. At SMPTE, he helped start the Global Inclusion Working Group with plans to connect with technical organizations, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

"To remain relevant, SMPTE must grow—and grow in an inclusive way—while continuing to meet the needs of existing members," says Jenkins. "By inclusive, I do mean staying on top of all the innovative processes, tools, workflows, and many other new and exciting things that are happening so quickly within our industry. But to understand what's relevant to our members and what's next for our industry, we also must reach out to our younger folks and connect them and their knowledge and energy with our experienced members and the wealth of knowledge they are eager to share. It's vital that we involve more people of color, more women, more people who may think differently and show them there is a place for them in media technology and the allied arts and sciences."

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