

Interview: Cody Keenan

Host: Maddie Stengel

On March 25, 2022, Cody Keenan joined me for a phone interview to discuss his experience as a speechwriter. In 2013, Cody succeeded Jon Favreau as President Barack Obama's Chief Speechwriter. Following their time in the White House, President Obama asked Cody to stay on as his speechwriter and book collaborator. He is now a partner at Fenway Strategies. Our discussion covers the logistics of speechwriting, including the importance of maintaining the voice of the speaker. We touched on Cody's history as an intern for Ted Kennedy which then led to his internship in the Obama senatorial campaign. His perspective is honest, straight forward, and maintains a deep respect for the intelligence of every audience member.

Maddie Stengel [MS]: I'm going to start pretty basic and ask, why speechwriting? Were you only interested in political speechwriting or did you also consider private speeches? And then maybe you can tell me if or how your values impacted that career trajectory?

Cody Keenan [CK]: None of the above. I never considered speechwriting. When I got to Washington, well - it takes a long time to find your first job. If you're trying to get a job in politics right out of the gate, people want to know what you can do and writing really good term papers is not something they care about. I took the first internship I got - I was lucky that it was a good one - and I ended up working in that office for four years. I was an intern for three months before I got hired in an entry level job. It wasn't until about four years into the job that two things happened at the same time: 1) In 2004, I was at the Democratic Convention working for my boss at the time and I was on the floor when Barack Obama gave his first big speech. I was riveted, but even then I wasn't like "Oh, I'm gonna be a speechwriter." Then, maybe a few months after that, my boss poked his head around the corner and said "hey, can you write a speech?" And I was just like "Sure!" I didn't, but I winged it anyway. Entry-level politics is a really good way to get thrown into things that you might not otherwise expect, like writing a speech and watching my boss deliver it on the Senate floor. From there, I got the bug. I did several more for my then-boss, he liked them, he asked me to keep doing more, and that's when a mutual friend connected me with Jon Favreau. The Obama campaign had *just* started up in early 2007 and Jon hired me as his intern. I didn't even apply to the Obama campaign, but a friend from my time in that Senate office saw my speeches. She said "I know Jon, he needs help, you guys will love each other" and she was right! That was 15 years ago and he's still one of my best friends. So that's the long way of answering your question - I didn't know I wanted to be a speechwriter, it just fell into my lap, I fell in love with it, and I've been doing it for 15 years now.

MS: So thinking back, you had this role fall into your lap and ended up taking over for Jon in the White House - what was it like to take Favreau's pen and personalize the role after he led you through that world?

CK: By that time I'd been working with him for 6 years, we shared an office for 2 years. Basically, from 2011 to 2013, he and I spent twelve to fourteen hours a day together and then went out at night. That made it really simple to transition with the President too, which gets into the second part of your question. How do you put your own stamp on it? You don't. Ideally no one would notice, the speeches keep sounding exactly like Barack Obama. We were lucky in that I had been there so long - we worked on a State of the Union address and the second inaugural address together - and we spent a lot of time with the President, so it was a really easy transition rather than somebody brand new starting from scratch.

MS: How important is it for the speechwriter to fully grasp the subject matter that you are communicating, like policies, legal analytics, issues? It sounds like you had a mentor to walk you through that part, but did you guys ever talk about that or were you expected to educate yourself on the job?

CK: It's not important. It would be great if you had knowledge of everything but you don't! I had a master's in public policy from Harvard so I could translate complicated policy white-papers into 'human speak,' but you don't have to be an expert in everything. Nobody's going to be. You just have to be able to write on every single topic. That's what speech writing is all about, taking complicated things and turning them into a story, making them simple, accessible, memorable. The fortunate part of working in the White House is you have all these policy geniuses around you. You can go to them and say "Explain this policy to me," but then it's up to you to explain it to real people (everyone else in America). We always joked that as a speechwriter, you get to be an expert in every single topic, but you're not a master of any of it. You don't get to say "Oh I don't understand this, sorry the speech is taking longer." It doesn't matter, he needs it tomorrow, so you have to get it done. Sometimes that means really late nights of studying and reading, but sometimes that means calling up the Treasury Secretary and asking "What does this mean?"

MS: Once you have that content, how do you tailor the speech to include all of the complexity for public delivery? How important is it to know the speaking voice and cadence of the person delivering the speech?

CK: It's the most important thing because that's who you work for. The speech is not about you and how good a writer you are, the speech should sound like it came from one person and one person only. If you've written a speech that anyone can deliver, then you've profoundly failed. Every speech has to sound like it came straight from the person delivering it, fully formed. That only comes from spending a lot of time with that person. I've met a lot of speechwriters who say they never get to see or talk to their principal and I say "that's a shitty job, and you should get out of it" because the President of the United States made time for us every single day, so I'm fairly

positive your boss can, too. That's the whole thing about speechwriting, it's a relationship between the person who writes a speech and the person who gives a speech, and ideally it should sound like it came directly from the person who gives the speech.

MS: Let's say you sit down in front of a clean page, does the possibility that your words will end up engraved on a building cross your mind?

CK: No

MS: You don't ever think about the pressure of writing for someone at that level?

CK: No, there's no time for pressure because we're working on 10 speeches a week and when you're Chief Speechwriter, you edit all of them. So you don't really have time to freak out (even though you still do) and you definitely don't have time to stop to think "maybe someday this will be carved into something." Also, if you're thinking that way then you're not really doing a good job on the speech. Any good speech talks to a moment in time and the audience in that moment in time. It only becomes something more permanent if it did that job, so if you're writing with an eye towards history, you are going to miss the crowd right in front of you.

MS: I watched the speech marking the anniversary of Selma and President Obama includes Americans with disabilities as part of the people who benefitted from a new sense of opportunity. However, what I am seeing in the world right now is a lot of anguish from disabled and compromised people because they feel left out of conversations specifically around COVID. So thinking about *this* moment in time, what role can a speechwriter play in ensuring that communication is made accessible to disabled and neurodiverse consumers?

CK: You kind of answered your own question, you just need to speak to them. Accessibility should be baked into the federal government by this point, especially a Democratic government because they care about this stuff (a Republican administration cares less). It should be baked into every agency to speak to audiences with disabilities - that should be a fundamental part of it. It took a long, long time but most speeches at the federal level now have Sign Language interpreters alongside them or closed captioning. All these things once seemed strange, but now they're part of the mainstream. Whatever it takes to make sure people feel communicated with, the federal government should keep doing that.

MS: Pivoting a bit, but I want to stay on the Selma speech, something that struck me was President Obama's capacity to make space for conflicting ideas, particularly around tragedy. In that moment of the speech, he was speaking about race in America and police brutality, but I want to ask a more broad question. How do you craft a speech that conveys duality?

CK: Well, that's kind of at the heart of America, right? That's at the heart of democracy. It's actually less difficult than you think, the whole purpose of democracy is to argue and debate and be a country that has multiple differing ideas right up front. [President Obama] was always more comfortable with nuance than most politicians and explaining or at least examining every side of every issue, even viewpoints that were in diametric opposition to his own. That was always second nature to him in a way that it wasn't for a lot of politicians, certainly not his successor, so that was something that became easy for us as we went along.

MS: Have you written for anyone since writing for President Obama?

CK: I have, I've written for several people since then.

MS: Can you tell me what it was like to get out of a voice you knew and move into a newer one?

CK: Two answers to that: 1) there are only a handful of people that I've written for several times since Obama (I still write for Obama too). But the most important thing about being a speechwriter is, like I said, really developing a relationship with the person you're writing for. So I've gotten to do that for a couple of other people and then I've also written for a bunch of people once or twice where you don't really build a bond with them, you just try to give them a good speech. It's not necessarily something they'll be invested in or that'll really sound like them, that just takes time. You know, you don't have to shed the voice. You can compartmentalize them, you can learn from that voice, but I wouldn't shed it. What's more important is that you spend time talking with and, more importantly, listening to the person you're writing for. You do your best to master their voice in addition to someone else's. You don't have to fully get rid of the other voice for whom you've been writing, but you do need to understand the new person. They might be completely different. So I would not shed anyone else you've written for because everything you've learned from somebody can inform the way you approach things for the rest of your life. I think it becomes a part of you, each voice does, and then you can whip it out like an old piece of music.

MS: I've been in the workforce for a while and jumped around, but I finally feel like I know what I want to do, so I have the luxury of saying "I want to become a speechwriter." Thinking back to those early moments, even though it fell into your lap, what was the most influential piece of advice or experience that sticks out to you long term?

CK: That's a good question. I mean, the first time I learned how important structure is, which sounds silly but if you kind of start writing a speech without knowing the structure, it'll fall apart on you several times and you'll have to start over. I don't know if that makes sense to you right now or not, but it will, and it took me longer to learn that lesson than it should have. Structure to a speech is everything. And so too is making sure the speech tells a story. The first question that

President Obama and I always ask each other (and him and Jon before me) was “What’s the story we are trying to tell?” You should know that before you really start writing - what’s your story? What’s the headline you want out of it? What’s the structure to it? All of that is really important. Someone who is actually not a speechwriter but a fiction author gave me a good piece of advice once that was: “You are not smarter than your audience.” That was something I always try to remember. *You are not smarter than your audience* - it means don’t talk down to them, it means you’re not trying to pull a fast one on them. The audience is smarter than you think and Obama said that too. He was always like “The audience is smarter than people give them credit for,” don’t talk down to people, talk to them on the level they’ll understand.

MS: When was that the hardest to implement? Did you ever have to fight against that instinct to over explain?

CK: Oh, sure, and policy people always try to get you to over explain, it’s a constant struggle to say “No I don’t need to do this, this is why we have websites and fact sheets.” Yeah, that’s a constant battle in the White House from the State of the Union on down, but the speechwriter always wins! At least in our world! We made sure to tell policy people like “Sorry, Charlie, put this stuff on a fact sheet, give it to a reporter, put it on a website, etc” but the American people don’t need to hear all of the ins and outs of the policy. Not in a speech, it’s boring.

MS: You’re still a partner at Fenway - what do you look for when you’re recruiting young writers? What stands out to you about newer voices? Or, is it the lack of their voices when writing for others?

CK: Beyond obviously being able to write a decent speech, we actually look for diversity of experience, people who have not been on a hardcore speechwriting trajectory since they were kids. One of the best hires I ever made at the White House was somebody, she could obviously write, but even more importantly to me, she’d done two years of Teach for America in New Orleans. I was like, “that’s the type of person I want writing about education policy, somebody who is a teacher, not just somebody who learned it all from white papers and scouring the Center for American Progress.” That’s still what we look for at Fenway now, “What have you done, what makes you interesting beyond just being a speechwriter, where have you lived, have you lived abroad, have you written for different publications, did you take a few years off writing to do something crazy?” Because speechwriting is really about empathy too, the ability to understand your audience and walk around in their skin for a while. You can get that from reading books, but you can also get it from being out and living different experiences, so I’ve always found that very important.