

Oral History Interview with Laura Harris, NBC 5 Co-Anchors for Weekday Morning Newscasts

Maddi Hurd: Okay. Let's start with some background questions like where did you grow up? Did you always know you wanted to be a journalist?

Laura Harris: I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and I did not know that I always wanted to be a journalist. When I went to college, I thought that I wanted to be a sports agent. That's what I went to school for. My major is in sport management and a minor in business administration. So then my junior year, and she was just saying, I was like, "Man, I don't know if I want to do this because I don't know if I want to go to law school And that sort of thing. I knew that I really love sports, and I really love communicating with people, so I kept my major but then I just started doing some internship at CNN Sports in Atlanta and Turner Sports in Atlanta. I did a semester internship at the NBC affiliate in Atlanta. When I graduated, I got a job in a small, small town Georgia. When I tell you small, one road. I will never forget this. On that road, there was a McDonald's, a Captain D's, three screen movie theater, and a Walmart, and you left the town.

Maddi: Wow. That's all you need.

Harris: And I was from Atlanta, so I was like, "What is happening?" Generally, in this business that's what happens. You start small, and then you work your way up.

Maddi: Right, and where did you go to college?

Harris: Georgia Southern. Do you know where Savannah, Georgia is?

Maddi: Yes.

Harris: So it's forty-five minutes--Savannah is forty-five minutes east of Georgia Southern. It is on the coast, and Georgia Southern's about 45 minutes in.

Maddi: Great. Awesome! One of our other group members wanted to know if you're a mother at the moment?

Harris: Nope.

Maddi: Great. Let's see. We had already said that.

Harris: No. You're fine.

Maddi: One of our group members wanted to know if you've experienced any discrimination in your career as a woman?

Harris: You know, it's funny when you ask that question because sometimes, you're just...Discrimination a lot of times people think of it as a racial issue Because I'm black or

because I'm white or because I'm Hispanic. Some people think of it as because I'm a woman or because I'm a man or because I'm this orientation. But for me I find that I have never known discrimination if it's happening to me. In TV, you sending your--it used to be at tape, but now it's the YouTube link. When your agent or whoever sends in your information, you'll never know who didn't hire you because you're a woman. You'll never know who did you because you were black, white, asian, whatever minority because you just don't get called, or they can say, "We went in a different direction." I find these days, especially, that you have to be so assertive that it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman or whatever you are. You know, my parents always told us, "First things first, always make sure you're doing a good job." If you're doing great work, there's no way that people can overlook you. You can, but it'd be the craziest thing because everybody wants a hard worker in their building. Do you believe, though, that the reason I have not experienced a lot of discrimination is because of all the women that came before me? You could go all the way back. You could talk about people like Barbara Walters. You just see women on TV now like Savannah Guthrie and Hoda Kotb, and it's like, "Oh my gosh. When do you ever remember this many women sitting on the desk?" Robin Roberts, and even before that Diane Sawyer. We're kind of the lucky ones in that we might not be dealing with that type of discrimination, but you also carry on your shoulders everyday, "Don't mess this up. Don't be the woman that messes this up for everybody coming behind we've seen history repeat itself with all kinds of things." You have to be the one to say, "I'm going to keep doing this the right way. I'm going to keep making sure that I'm doing good work." For me, I just want to make sure that I'm doing good work for everyone--not just for women. I want little boys and girls who are watching TV to say, "That's kind of cool. I want to do that too."

Tory Josey: Yeah.

Harris: I just think that that's so important. For me, there could have been discrimination, and I just didn't know it. I can't tell you how many jobs I didn't get. There have been several. It happens all the time. When I came here, I was actually in Tampa, Florida, and I was there for six years. Hey, I don't know if there was any discrimination for people that were getting hired there. When I was trying to get this job, and there were a couple of other jobs that I wanted and just get them. You never know. Did they not like my delivery, or did they not like that I look like this? Did they not like that I wasn't this?

Maddi: Right.

Harris: I feel like I appreciate never know when. I would be so mad.

Maddi: Yeah.

Tory: Yeah. Yeah. Sometimes that's the best thing.

Harris: Ignorance is bliss. With something like that, I would look at them and say, "I'm sorry because why?" It's probably good that I've never known that when I think about it.

[Laughs]

Maddi: After working in the small town in Georgia, did you go to Florida right after that, or were there other steps in between?

Harris: No, I went from there and the town was called Toccoa, Georgia. Look it up on a map. You'll be like, "Where is this place?"

[Laughs]

Harris: It's T-O-C-C-O-A. I left there, and the television station I was working for there was actually sold to the University of Georgia. I moved to Athens because the television station was actually on the campus of UGA. I was there for all of--it might have just been ten months. From there, I got a morning anchor job in Charleston, South Carolina, so I worked for the ABC affiliate there for two years for WCIV. That's when I went to Tampa, and I was hired in Tampa at the ABC affiliate there, I was just a morning reporter. That was my job. Then, I actually got promoted to 4 p.m. anchor, and then I was promoted again. I was doing the 4 p.m. and the 5:30 p.m. That's what I was doing before I got this job and left.

Maddi: Great.

Tory: Cool.

Maddi: What have been some of the hardest parts of your career?

Harris: Working really, really hard and sometimes feeling like it doesn't get noticed.

Tory: Mmm

Harris: I'm not saying that's on purpose. I'm not saying that that's what happens to me here, but in my experience, there is nothing worse in this life than busting your butt everyday and feeling like you don't get noticed.

What I tell people, especially women in this industry, I say, "The bottom line is..." I was a soccer player all my life. I played soccer in college, and when you're a Division I athlete, you're getting noticed because you're on the team. There were only twenty of us, so you're getting noticed by somebody because you are here and you are getting a scholarship. I tell people all the time, "Just think of it as a sport." If you're doing all the right things, usually they don't say a lot to you. People say, "Coach rides the person with the most potential the most." Yeah, but at the end of the day, if you're doing all the right things, you're doing a great job, they're saying some things to you, but they're not always on top of you. If you know that you're always giving one hundred percent--always--no matter what, then you know your reward is coming.

A good friend of mine always used to say, "Our reward comes every two weeks," because that's when he would get paid.

[Everyone laughs]

Harris: That's how I think of it. Sometimes when I get discouraged, and I say, "I did all of that work. I did all of that, and nobody said anything." Then you have to say to yourself it got on air, and it was really great. It was a part of the team, and it was a part of the newscast. You made that happen. Sometimes you have to say to yourself be a grown-up. You don't need people to tell you, you did a good job, Laura. That was nice.

Sometimes I have to kind of check myself on that--that part and what viewers say about us because everybody has what I like to call keyboard courage now. For anybody man or woman who's getting into this industry, it's really hard. People say the meanest things because they don't have to talk to you in your face. They can send you an email from an anonymous email address, even if they left their name. What am I going to do? People say things on social media and you're like, "How could you say something that awful to someone?"

Maddi: There's no consequence.

Harris: There's no consequence. You're in a space where, "Okay. I'm here. I've made it here. I cannot let this person, wherever they're sending an email from, ruin my day." "I hate your jacket." Okay.

[Laughs]

Harris: One thing about Texas, and you all will know this, you all have cities that are pronounced that they should never be spelled that way.

Tory: Right.

Harris: I'm like, "Why is it spelled like that if this is how you're supposed to say it?" When I first got here--and I don't know why--but I did it three times and I kept calling it Waxahatchie.

Tory: Oh.

[Laughs]

Harris: Oh my gosh! So you get it. It hurts in the moment. You know, I'll drive home, and I'll think about it the whole way there. You just have to have a really short memory, so it's, "The sun will come up tomorrow, and we're going to do this all over again. It's going to be okay. Nobody got fired. Nobody got arrested. Nobody died. We're going to be okay." I think those are the hardest parts, though.

Maddi: Yeah. What are some of the best parts?

Harris: Oh gosh! So many things! This is the greatest thing I've ever had the opportunity to do is to be on TV.

Tory: Mmm

Harris: I love what I do everyday. It does not bother me to get up at 1:45 in the morning. It just doesn't because I love this. We have this segment now called "Something Good," so everyday, we tell a positive story about somebody in our community doing something amazing. What I have learned from that, is that I have so much hope for the future.

I have to be honest with you. One of the reasons I don't have children right now is that I'm not married, and I don't have somebody that I would have kids with, but if I was married, I would still think twice about having children because of the world we live in right now. I'd be scared for them.

Tory: Mhm

Harris: You send kids to school these days, and then...I just knew that when Sandy Hook happened, I just knew that this would never happen again. I just knew that this was that that was the day. We are looking at these twenty little faces, and this will never happen again. We've had hundreds since then. You know.

My point is that you can say, "I don't like it. It's horrible." I say, "I get that, but just give us a try."

Maddi: I get that. Where do you want to go next in your career? Are you happy where you are, or is there another step for you?

Harris: I always tell people that I want whatever God wants for me. That's my thing. I've only been here now for...I moved here last August. I am just so happy and so thrilled to be here. I am just so blessed to be here. If I was working in Dallas-Fort Worth for the rest of my life, it would be okay. It would be more than okay. It would be great. This is great television station to work at. This is a great company to work for. They're all about equality.

Maddi: Oh.

Harris: Everybody matters. I think that's what I meant by I just don't experience that here because it's like every person matters, and that's always nice.

Maddi: That's wonderful. That's great.

Harris: Yeah.

Maddi: Tory, did you have any questions you wanted to ask?

Tory: Just going back to what you said about as a woman, making sure that you don't ruin it for other women because it is so hard for women to make it in the industry, do you feel like you walk on eggshells?

Harris: I don't think that, but I find myself being very careful with the things that I say and do on camera and off camera.

Tory: Okay.

Harris: I wish that I had an example for on camera. If I think of one when you guys leave, I'll send you an email. For me it's always making sure that what comes out of my mouth is perfect. We all make mistakes. We're all human beings. First of all, things that we say could get us sued, could get the station sued. Libel is a real thing. Slander is a real thing. You have to make sure, every time you write something it's "allegedly." Police say they did it. I didn't say they did it. Then, when they get convicted, you can, you know. That was something I learned really early.

The first station I worked at, I left off the allegedly. Nothing bad happened. Nobody got in trouble. It was caught before we went on the air, but the producer was like, "How could you leave that out?" I will never forget it. It's true. Just look at the guy in Hunt County who didn't kill those people. He's been telling people for eight days now, "I didn't do that. That was not me." And he really didn't do it. It's like, "Oh my God!"

Tory: Yeah.

Harris: If we would have...You almost feel really bad, but we were just doing our job. That was the person who was arrested at the time. You also have to think, "Oh my gosh. This poor guy and his family and his brother who was on TV crying saying, 'I'm telling you he didn't do it.'" All of us were like,

Tory: Yeah.

Harris: "Tell it to everybody else who didn't do it," but he really didn't do it. You just have to be very, very careful. That's with anybody. We just need to be careful with what we say, especially in the political climate that we're in right now. People are very quick to call things fake news. It's not true. The media are trying to spin something or say it's not true. I would never want someone to think that I'm perpetuating that, that I'm saying things that aren't true. Just in general that as a journalist, you want to make sure that you're just doing the right thing. Do you know what I'm saying?

Tory: Mhm

Harris: I know I get so tired sometimes. I was writing a web story before you came, and the last thing I wanted to do is proofread it.

Maddi: Yeah.

Tory: Yeah.

Harris: I've already written it. I don't want to see it anymore, but if I put that up there and then my colleagues are the ones who--because it goes through and the web department has to proofread it. You don't want your colleagues to think you don't care.

Tory: Mhm

Harris: You make sure that you proofread it, and you know if they catch an error it's like oh, I didn't see it, you know. But it's just like what are you gonna do? But it's important, as a journalist, we just have jobs where it's like, we have to be right because the public expects us to be right. So it's not so much walking on eggshells because I'm a woman, it's walking on eggshells because well let's just make sure we get it right.

Tory: Right.

Harris: Before we say something we don't mean and then you have to say a retraction on air. That's the worst... to get on TV and say you said the wrong thing. It's like...

[Everyone laughs]

Harris: You don't want to have to be the person who reads that, but it happens.

Tory: Right. So since this is a story about you and we're going to write it on paper, uh, how old are you?

Harris: Thirty-four.

Tory: Ok, and what is your ethnicity background?

Harris: I'm black.

Tory: Where did you grow up at?

Harris: Atlanta.

Tory: Atlanta, OK. Alright, no more questions.

Harris: That's all you've got?

Maddi: No, I have one more.

Harris: OK. (laughs)

Maddi: So this is on some female journalists from across the decades. Who would you say you most admire? Who's your role model?

Harris: Oh, that's a good one. There are a lot of different people for a lot of different reasons. I look up to Hoda Kotb because I look at her, and I think she's 54 now, she just adopted two babies, she's got the tiniest of kids, and she's still getting up there and rockin' it every day, you know. So for that, because moms have the hardest job in the world, I don't care what anybody says. I've never been a mom, I watched my mom, and I'm like, "Yeah, no, I'm good!"

[Laughs]

Harris: I cannot imagine working these hours and having small children and to watch her do that is fun. You know, I look up to Robin Roberts for her strength. You know, she battled cancer, then she's gotta get the bone marrow transplant, it's like, what can this woman not do? Right? So her... and this funny, but I really like Ginger Zee, who's the meteorologist on Good Morning America, and I like her because she is always attacking the internet trolls. Like she just has this, "I'm not going to allow you to talk about me or my colleagues in that manner. That's not how we are going to conduct ourselves."

So every time somebody says something... and somebody said something crazy to her about how her outfit looked stupid or she looked fat one day and I think she writes them back every time. It's like she's watching for somebody to say something mean to her. That's something that a lot of women don't do these days and they don't stick up for themselves, you know, and oftentimes the hardest critics are other women, and that's the part that's disheartening. You know, because you would think that, you know, birds of a feather. I'm just like you! I'm working just as hard as you are, I wanna freakin help you, why don't you want to help me? Or just the women who, and I've seen this before in other newsrooms, but I'm just seeing people that are so hell bent on "Why'd she do all that work? That's above and beyond.'

Tory: Yes.

Harris: I'm sure you've seen that in college. College was my first eye-opening experience with that, people were mad at you for working hard, but really they're just mad at themselves for not shining like you are. And so that said, you've got to just let that fall by the wayside. Because you will always have somebody, whether in the newsroom, office space, whatever, always... I can just tell, you guys are the hard workers, right? So you're the one who's always working hard and doing extra, and staying up late, and then there's this person who's always like (unknown gesture or expression), Tory if you would have done this, this, and this none of us would have had to do it. Like, why are you concerned about me? I just did my assignment and I did it the way I wanted to do it. You don't have to be concerned with me. So you just have to be very cognizant of that, because that'll be enough to really break you down. Like, 'well am I doing the wrong thing?' No, you're supposed to be working hard, you're supposed to be earning your check. Don't be that person who's just like ... I'm gonna sit here and [inaudible] because they're there.

Maddi: Just out of curiosity, so the criticism that comes from social media, is it about appearances?

Harris: Yes, all the time.

Tory: Because you're on TV.

Harris: Because you're on TV. Because everyone knows how to do your job better than you. Clothes, hair, makeup, whatever you think, they have commented. Not just here, I'm saying anybody who's ever been in a public space. Because just think of it this way, when you watch

the Golden globes when they wear all the beautiful golden dresses... But when you watch that, they have a whole hour dedicated to someone from Style.com and they're like "What are you wearing?" "I'm wearing Versace." "And what did you..." "And I'm also wearing this..." Like, so what are we here for? Is this New York Fashion Week or...? But to that point, people are fascinated by what people put on every day for whatever reason. You know, I love watching other women because I like to... ooh I wonder where she got that from? You know? Or how she put that together. I would have never thought of those colors. I'm going to try that out. But i'm telling you, people are relentless. I had a lady who kept emailing me. She wouldn't stop. It's incredible, but again, you take it with a grain of salt. You think to yourself, "I'm the one in this position." And you also think to yourself that it would be funny if people had to send in pictures, like if you're going to comment on my eyebrows--

Tory: Send in a picture of your eyebrows.

[Laughs]

Harris: If you're going to comment on the pants I'm wearing, send in a picture of your pants! (Laughs) Right? And I bet it would cut it all out.

Tory: Right.

Harris: Generally people who are really, really secure in what they look like, they could care less about what everybody else looks like. Unless you were to say, "Hey, where did you get that pair of earrings? I really want to get a pair of those." And now we're both in the conversation. "Oh, I got them from here, they were on sale... blah, blah, blah." Instead of, "Can you believe she's wearing those earrings?" It just sounds crazy. The amount of time that must take to find my email address because it's not...there used to be a time where it would be "Laura Harris" and then my email, but now it's Laura Harris and our Twitter handle. So they literally get online to find my email address to send me an email. So that's also a time where you say to yourself, "You've got all the time in the world." Y'all, I don't have time right now to pick up the phone and call my own mother, let alone go find someone's email address and talk about what they have on today. But you get it, it's like par for the course. And it doesn't happen all the time.

But it's kind of like when I went to business school, one of the things they taught us, and I'll never forget this, if somebody has a bad experience at a restaurant, or a gym, or whatever it might be, they will to seven of their friends don't got here. The steak was overcooked, or the fries were cold, or everything over there is just nasty, it looks like they don't clean that place. But if they had a great experience they might tell three people and only because those people asked them about their experience. So you knew that I had gone to Laura's Steakhouse last night, "How was it?" "Oh it was awesome, I loved the..." That person's really trying to help. She's like paid to come in here and help us. But as far as you allowing somebody else to make you feel self-conscious because of what you decided to do or wear, that's just not. That's just not the way I conduct myself, so that's why it just kind of appalls me when it happens because it's like, "I'm too sleepy." I always tell people, "I'm tired."

[Laughs]

Maddi: It sounds like you have a really supportive environment here.

Harris: Yeah, this place is awesome. And I'm not saying that because I work here. If I wasn't working here tomorrow I would say, "NBC 5 is the best television station I've ever worked for," I would say that. I mean you always have, whatever it might be, a bunch of different personalities--even in your family. There's so many different personalities. My sister and I are so different that there are times where I'm just like "What are you talking about? Like, how are you even thinking that way?" And we will walk away from it so far apart, and never agree. So that's how it is here, same thing, but everyone's working toward the same goal.

You know, on a sports team, you could have people that you... it's not that you don't like them, but you maybe don't like the way they think, but at the end of the day all of us are here for a common goal and that's what I love about this station. Everybody is willing to say, "What do you think?" "OK, what do you think?" "Well this is what I think, so let's try to figure out a way to get to the middle here so we can get this done." Instead of just, "We're going with Tory's idea. Your idea doesn't matter. My idea doesn't matter." How does that work? Tory doesn't know what I know, and she doesn't know what she knows, so how are we? I've worked at places like that, and that's not fun.

Tory and Maddi: Right.

Maddi: How does your family feel about your career? Do they like watching you?

Harris: They love it. My mom watches the live stream, because they live in Atlanta, so she watches it on her phone. It's funny though, like for me you know, people will notice us out and about, come up to us and talk to us. I don't even think of it that way. I just think about this as something that I love to do everyday. It's a job that I have to do. It's my career. I want to make sure that I'm doing a good job. But it's funny, like sometimes you just have to just sit and say, "This is kind of cool." This is kind of cool.

Maddi: Do you often get recognized in public? Like when you're out grocery shopping?

Harris: Now I do. So, when I first got hired here, I was a weekend anchor, and then a reporter three days a week, so I rarely got noticed. But now, oh it's everywhere. Especially... you can really tell where people are NBC fans because you get noticed those places all the time. Like, at my gym all the time. If you go certain places in Dallas, you can't walk in the store without... um, there's a Tom Thumb near my house, you can't go in without someone-- you can just tell when that neighborhood's people watch NBC. If I went somewhere where they watch CBS all the time, they probably wouldn't know who I was. And that happens, like you know, it all depends on what you like to watch at night. So, our primetime lineup, it does well, but Wednesdays especially because we have that Chicago series, so Chicago Fire, PD, and Med, so anyone who's watching those is generally watching the 10 o'clock newscast as well. Like Brian and Meredith... Brian goes to my gym and he perfectly works out at the same time every day because the novelty's worn off, he says. Everybody knows who he is but they don't care anymore. But if he were to go two hours later, or two hours earlier, he wouldn't be able to work out. These

people wouldn't leave him alone. Yeah, so it's just kind of like that and it's awesome. People always say, "I don't like being noticed" and I'm like, "Are you kidding me? That means people are watching! We love it." I mean, we just love it. We love when people talk to us, and they love what they see or my favorite is when somebody says, "I saw that story about that kid who did that thing and I just thought it was so awesome." It's like [inaudible] so good.

Maddi: What advice do you have for up and coming journalists?

Harris: Be yourself. Oh my God, be yourself. Don't do anything crazy. I'm not saying get up on TV and say crazy things. But be yourself. There are enough people in this world who are acting like clones, we don't need any of those. We need everybody to be themselves. I'm actually doing a commencement address at my university in a month for the people who are graduating, the 2019 class. And part of what I'm going to talk to them about, you know, people always talk about, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And once you get out of college, that question, that ship has sailed. But you can always still ask yourself what you want to become. So when you get on and when you become a journalist, whether it be in print, TV, whatever, what is your purpose? What do you want people--I want to make people smile, that's my thing. This hard news stuff, I've got to do it. But I want to make people smile, and I want to make people see we still live in an amazing place, and there are still such great people around you.

All of us need to start highlighting the good people are doing instead of calling the police on everybody around us, you know what I'm saying? And so, that's some of the things... what do you want to become? And that may take you a long time to figure out. I'm still kind of figuring it out. I just know that I want to tell good stories, and I want to make people smile. It's not so much that I'm up here being funny or being a clown or anything like that, it's that I want you to see there are still so many good things happening in this world. And you can be a good person, too. So hopefully people see this about this kid tomorrow, and they say, "Well I want to donate! I'll go take this kid some toys. Why not?" And then you've done something good. Look at you, being a good person! Look at how easy that was.

So you also want to inspire. Like, I do this thing...we do this thing here at the station called "Reading with You" because I'm so into making sure that kids are literate. There are so many kids who go past the third grade, and they can't read. People can't tell because they fake it. It's easy to fake it when you can memorize a book, so there's several programs in town but here we have "Reading with You." And so we've been so blessed to have community partners who donate books, who donate money so we can go get these kids brand new books. That's where I'm going today. And so it's second graders, I'm going to give them books and talk to them about reading and if you reach just one kid who's like "I hate reading." It's like, "Dude, you can't hate reading. Like, I don't care what your career's going to be. You can't hate reading." You can not like having to read, but you know the objective for us is to teach kids that readers are leaders. These are people who do amazing things in life no matter what. I mean your job could be a bus driver, or a custodian, but Lord only knows you need to know how to read. And you can't put Clorox on this or else it'll explode. So just teaching kids the importance of reading and that reading is fun. So that's another thing we get to do every day, so I just encourage you to have a passion and keep going forward and just think of how big your voice is if you're a journalist. There's so many people on this earth with great ideas, but they're stuck behind a desk

all day and they're answering phones. That's their job, and they can't figure out a way to get the idea out there, but you're a journalist and you have so many avenues to do it and just make sure that you do it. Just be yourself and don't let anybody tell you that's a stupid idea. Straight and narrow. Just keep doing it.