



# CENTER FOR MEDIA INNOVATION

## Point Park University

**For Immediate Release**  
**September 10, 2019**

### **Erica Hensley of Mississippi Today wins \$20,000 media fellowship from Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University**

**PITTSBURGH, PA** – Erica Hensley of Mississippi Today is the winner of the inaugural \$20,000 Doris O’Donnell Innovations in Investigative Journalism Fellowship from the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University.

Hensley, Health/Data Reporter and Knight Foundation Fellow at Mississippi Today, proposed a project that will examine how Mississippi handles the threat of lead poisoning by comparing data from state and nonprofit targeted high-risk areas and intervention strategies. Testing and data is sparse and uncoordinated. The project will take its resulting analysis and apply it to determining what interventions in communities will work to mitigate risk of lead exposure. These communities are under-covered by news outlets, and the people there are underinsured and not well-served by environmental protection agencies because of the unique nature of lead poisoning.



**DORIS O’DONNELL**  
INNOVATIONS IN INVESTIGATIVE  
JOURNALISM FELLOWSHIP

“Erica’s project fulfills the mission of the Doris O’Donnell Fellowship by focusing on a critical public health issue in areas of Mississippi that have little or no local news coverage,” said Andrew Conte, director of the Center for Media Innovation. “If Erica was not pursuing this line of reporting, it’s very likely that no one else would. That kind of journalism upholds the foundational principles of the craft by speaking up for those residents who do not have the means to be heard and by holding to account the powerful who have the ability to monitor and limit lead exposure.”

The annual fellowship is made possible through a three-year grant from the Allegheny Foundation. With the number of underserved markets – known as news deserts – growing throughout the United States, the fellowship is just the latest effort from the Center designed to spotlight and take on the problem.

Hensley said she was “beyond honored” and energized to push the boundaries of public health reporting for underserved communities.

“As Mississippi’s only fully staffed nonprofit newsroom, it’s part of our mission to tell stories that have long gone reported,” she said. “This fellowship bolsters our mission and ensures we have the means to mine through existing databases, build our own, and spend time on the ground where people are most affected by lead exposure and poisoning.”

Hensley will have six months to produce and publish the final story or series of stories. In addition, she will be required to come to Point Park University’s Downtown Pittsburgh campus three times, which includes an event to celebrate her work. As part of that process, Conte has identified two journalism classes Hensley will stay in contact with throughout the school year.

“We are so pleased to be working with Erica at the Center, but we also are eager for her to collaborate with Point Park students,” Conte said.

A panel of five distinguished judges with credentials in innovative and investigative journalism evaluated applicants based on value, innovation, engagement, diversity and ability.

“I’m grateful for the wisdom and enthusiasm of our judging panel, who diligently pored over a number of terrific applications,” Conte said.

That judging panel included:

- **Penny Abernathy**, a former executive at The Wall Street Journal and New York Times who is now the Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the University of North Carolina. She is the author of “The Expanding News Deserts,” a major 2018 report that documents the decline and loss of local news organizations in the U.S.
- **David Folkenflik**, a media correspondent for NPR News, and host and editor of On Point from NPR and WBUR, Boston’s NPR station. His stories and analyses are broadcast throughout NPR’s newsmagazines, including All Things Considered, Morning Edition, and Here & Now.
- **Amber Hunt**, an investigative reporter for the Cincinnati Enquirer. She is part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team at the Enquirer, where she also hosts the podcast “Accused,” an award-winning true crime serial that reached No. 1 on iTunes and has 20 million downloads to date. She’s written six books, including the New York Times bestseller “The Kennedy Wives.”
- **Brentin Mock**, a Pittsburgh-based staff writer for CityLab, a standalone website from The Atlantic that explores trends shaping our country’s urban future, and captures the creativity and vibrancy of our increasingly urbanized world.
- **Carl Prine**, editor of the Navy Times, who covered the invasion of Iraq for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review and was later deployed to Iraq as an Army guardsman. Prior to the Navy Times, he covered the military beat and breaking national news at the San Diego Union-Tribune. In 2012, Prine won an Investigative Reporters and Editors Award for “Rules of Engagement,” a report on a 2007 incident in which U.S. soldiers shot three unarmed deaf Iraqi boys.

For more information on the fellowship, go to [www.DorisODonnellFellowship.com](http://www.DorisODonnellFellowship.com).

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*The Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University is a state-of-the-art incubator and collaborative space designed to prepare students for success in a media industry intertwined with the latest technology, while also supporting professional journalists and educating the public at large. The Center features TV and radio/podcast studios, a photo studio, a multimedia newsroom, and a transformational presentation and gallery space. Visit [CenterForMediaInnovation.com](http://CenterForMediaInnovation.com) to learn more.*

*Point Park University, immersed in the heart of Downtown Pittsburgh, focuses on student success through innovative experiential learning opportunities. Point Park enrolls more than 4,000 students in over 100 undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs offered through its Conservatory of Performing Arts, Rowland School of Business, and schools of Arts and Sciences, Communication, and Education. The University's alumni and students represent all 50 states and 34 countries around the world. Visit [PointPark.edu](http://PointPark.edu) to learn more.*