

“You Have to Have a Fire” A Conversation With Brian Williams

As a young man, Brian Williams served as a White House intern. Today, he is better known as the anchor and managing editor of *NBC Nightly News*. He has also lectured journalism students at Columbia University.

Last month, Scholastic Kid Reporters Kajal Jani and Jack Greenberg, both 11, interviewed Williams at the *Nightly News* studios in New York City. Because this is a presidential election year, it is no surprise that politics was the main topic of conversation. Here are some excerpts. (A more complete interview is available at www.scholastic.com/juniorscholastic.)



Williams with our Kid Reporters.

PHOTO BY JON WHITNEY

Q. How do you stay objective and focused when you're questioning presidential candidates?

A. You have to balance everything. I don't even discuss with members of my own family the way I feel about politics. . . . Everything I learn and ask about someone I try to balance out on the other side.

Q. What do you think of the fact that the Democratic nominee will be a woman or an African-American?

A. Here's how I'd put it: [As a kid], I had a classroom that is probably like most of the classrooms you've had. There was a poster that [pictured] each of the American Presidents in an oval. . . . They're all white males. But we're not all-white-male as a country. If a Democrat wins, history will be made. Then, that last oval [will] look totally unlike the previous 43.

Q. Why haven't reporters pressed candidates more on certain issues, such as education reform?

A. Sometimes the conversations in an election year take on a life of their own. . . . I will say this, though: With the Internet, there's no short-

age of information. No one in this country can say, "Hey I can't find out Obama's stand on college loans. I can't find out how Clinton stands on the draft." It's on their Web sites. . . . The Internet has made us all better researchers because we're out there looking for the facts.

Q. Do you think a President can make a difference when Congress is really making the decisions?

A. That's the John F. Kennedy question. . . . [He] sent out a challenge to the country that there's nothing we can't do. I would argue that Ronald Reagan was the next agent of change. . . . If he or she stands up and says, "I know where to take us, follow me," the President can control Congress. The people will follow that President. Once in a while, [such] a President comes along.

Q. Why do some states have primaries and others caucuses?

A. History. Quirkiness. Weird rules. . . . There's [no law] that says our President should place his hand on a Bible to get sworn in. [George] Washington started it, and

it's a tradition, not a law. Traditions are powerful and can be comforting. Some can be wrong. . . . It was [once] tradition in the South that black people and white people couldn't use the same drinking fountain. With laws, we ended [it]. A lot of election practices are just traditions that can be [changed].

Q. What would you say to kids who plan on a career in journalism?

A. I want them to be able to say that there's nothing they'd rather do. . . . You have to have a fire; there's nothing you'd rather do. Like hoops of burning fire—you'll walk right through them to get a job in journalism. I always tell people to remain true to your values. Don't take a job with some company whose publication you wouldn't buy or read yourself. . . . Hold out for a better job. If you're good at journalism the good jobs will come to you, because your work will stand out. **JS**

For a biography of Brian Williams, see:
msnbc.msn.com/id/3667173