**By Tess Ikonomou**

**2016 Student Journalist of the Year**

**T**here were a variety of panels and demonstrations to choose from at the 2017 IRE conference in Phoenix. You couldn’t possibly attend every one.

Knowing this, I tried to be as strategic as possible, choosing panels that would diversify my knowledge and, more importantly, be applicable back home.

It became clear very quickly that Australian journalists do not have the same access to information that our American counterparts do. There also seems to be a prevailing belief in the US that the public have a right to know.

I was shocked to learn that the security tools session was being taken by a former FBI agent. Some of what he was teaching us was how to protect ourselves from police surveillance because, as he told me, he believes “journalism is fundamental for a functioning democracy”.

While I enjoyed all the panels I attended, there were definitely highlights. I particularly liked following the money, shining a light on dark money, digging into documents. These were great. We were being shown how to trace money through databases, property records and discovery material in lawsuits.

I have an interest in national security and defence reporting, so I was pleased that a panel on watchdogging the military was on offer. I took a lot away from it and learnt about making that initial contact and how to build relationships.

I also really enjoyed a presentation on mastering the investigative interview given by Canadian producer Julian Sher. He said there was no such thing as bad talent, only failure on the part of the interviewer. It made me think about how I structure interviews, and what techniques I can begin to incorporate into my own style.

What really resonated with me was advice given by the *Boston Globe’s* Mike Rezendes. He told us that people are at the heart of the best stories and that you should never assume someone won’t talk you. Everyone wants to talk, it is our job as journalists to figure out how to let that person open up.

A month before the conference, IRE advertised a mentoring program. I applied for it and was matched up with a TV journalist. My mentor is currently working on documentaries. We spoke about experimenting with story-telling techniques.

It was great to have made that connection as I was invited to join his team at the IRE awards luncheon.

It was a great vibe - I was in a huge room filled with journalists from over 20 different countries, all celebrating the great work being done in newsrooms across the world.

We were also treated to members of the Spotlight team acting out scenes from the movie.

The keynote address was delivered by Nikole Hannah-Jones of *The New York Times Magazine*. She spoke about her experiences growing up as a black woman and the different perspective that had given her as a reporter.

She raised the issue of the lack of diversity in American newsrooms, which was interesting because it’s an argument that is being made in our own workplaces.

I’d like to thank the Melbourne Press Club and the Vizard Foundation for sponsoring my award. I’ve come back home determined, and I’m very grateful for the opportunity that I’ve been given.