Inside the Issue

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It is nearing lunchtime in the heart of Manhattan’s Garment District, and one by one, three vibrant women walk into the conference room at Quinn & Co., a small, successful public relations firm servicing the travel industry. And although the cacophony from the street below is overpowering, it is no match for the sound of the happy reunion between Public Relations Professor Ellen Tashie Frisina (1977) and Hofstra alumnae Carla Caccavale (1998, journalism), Cristina Rivas (2002, mass media studies) and Gina Galatro (2003, public relations).

The four began talking and laughing, their voices overlapping in excitement, remembering their days at Hofstra and how that time influenced their professional lives.

Caccavale, Rivas and Galatro talked about how Professor Frisina – who has made it a habit, and even a mission, to help her students find professional fulfillment – introduced them to one another. Rivas said, “One day after graduation, I got an e-mail from Ellen, asking if I had gotten a job yet, and it was strange because Ellen talked about Carla and Quinn & Co. in class, and every time Carla was coming in I had a class or another commitment. I had been interested because my parents worked in the travel industry and I had always traveled. And since I never got to meet Carla at Hofstra, I took the opportunity to interview with her. And it was a great fit, I started the next Monday.”

“When we set up the program, I thought the hardest thing I would do is create a network … but it would be an important part of what I do,” said Frisina. “I believe in the Hofstra family. The way to make the program successful is to create the network, and now our students are getting jobs.”

It was a visit to Hofstra the following year that brought Caccavale, now a partner at Quinn & Company, and Galatro together. “I was one of those types who was obsessed with getting a job,” explained Galatro, “and in February before graduation, I asked Ellen about the woman she introduced me to a year ago – she did something with travel, and …”
Frisina said, “I said you have to meet Gina . . .”
Caccavale interjected, “and Gina came into the class that I was visiting, and we had exactly the same outfit on – black pants, white shirt, jean jacket. It was like a sign.” Caccavale continued, “Ellen knows us all so well. Other than the three of us, there have been six other Hofstra alumni who worked for Quinn – if they have Ellen’s endorsement, they end up getting a full-time job.”

The laughter was infectious, and the three talked about their passion for public relations as a discipline and their affection for their mentor. But their affection for former professors, fellow alumni and Hofstra’s interdisciplinary approach, is not unique among graduates in the School of Communication.

The Continuing Influence of Faculty

“Sybil DelGaudio was a major influence on me,” said alumna Missy Cohen (1990, communication arts – film studies). “She was a godsend. I went to Hofstra to study television, and I took the Introduction to Film course. Sybil was the professor, and she broke down film in terms I understood. She made it so exciting and inspiring. I knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

Cohen applied what she learned at Hofstra to her career as a sound and music editor, working on diverse projects such as Sex and the City, Chicago, A Beautiful Mind, and her first job out of school, The Silence of the Lambs. “Bette Gordon saw how into sound I was as we were making our senior film, and she knew the man who was doing the sound on The Silence of the Lambs, so she helped me get in there. But I already had steady work waiting for me at the Discovery Channel. I asked Sybil – what should I do? She thought about it, and said, ‘I think you should really stay with the Discovery Channel job,’ ” Cohen laughs. “I think she still tells that story to her classes as the moral of the story is, whatever Sybil tells you to do, do the opposite.”

“When I graduated I hadn’t heard if I got the job, and I went home to Virginia. Weeks later I found out I got the job, but had to start in three weeks. Sybil sent me the Village Voice apartment listings, with things I could afford circled, and little notes like ‘good neighborhood!’ and helped me find a place to live.”

Many alumni tell of their unique connection to faculty members in the School of Communication. “I’ve known Nancy Kaplan almost 20 years,” said Robyn (Einbinder) Koeppel (1987, communication arts – television production). “I went with her to see her as the stage manager for ‘All My Children’ and I knew I wanted to be in TV production.” Now the prepress director at Time4Media, Koeppel credits her association with Hofstra, and specifically with Kaplan (1971, 1991), for her ability to change her career direction. “It is hard when you get out of school. New graduates don’t understand how to translate their education into a career – that you have to start at the bottom and grow at a job. A lot of it is luck and timing, but it is also who you know, someone like Nancy Kaplan, who can help you find your way.”

Today Koeppel gives back as a career volunteer for the Hofstra CAN! (Career Assistance Network) program. “What I like about Hofstra CAN! is that I can help people find their way. I talk to students about how it is important not to narrow themselves down, but take experiences and learn from them.”

It is the broad base of knowledge that former students speak of most often when they talk about their Hofstra
experience. Conrad Piccirillo (1982, communications arts – television/film), president of Innovative, an Indianapolis communications design firm specializing in the creation of high-end visual graphics, says, “99% of succeeding in TV is the ability to organize and communicate thoughts into stories and then communicate to others.”

Pccirillo, who still speaks to Professor Nancy Kaplan a few times a year, has a broad network of Hofstra alumni with whom he keeps in touch. “The good news is a lot of great production people who graduated from Hofstra work in live sports and entertainment. I have meetings coming up for the X Games for ESPN and there will be no fewer than four other Hofstra alumni – Neil Goldberg, who is producing NASCAR for Fox; Bruce Bernstein, who is in charge of engineering and operations for the X Games; Larry Wilson who heads ESPN’s crewing operations for the X Games; and Kevin Stolworthy, the head of studio production.”

Knowing It All

Diana Gay (1992, B.S.), who is now a producer at Grey Advertising, credits Hofstra faculty and the interdisciplinary curriculum for her success. “The thing I thought was great, if this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, then I knew that it taught me to be extremely focused … the well-rounded education taught me how to do everything. I may not be able to run an Avid, but I have an understanding of it … how it works, and it helps me in my job.”

Over and over again, alumni credit the School of Communication’s well-rounded curriculum and the balance of theory and practical knowledge for their ability to adapt to a rapidly changing professional landscape. But it is also the connection that alumni have with each other and with their former professors that gives them a professional edge.

At Grey Worldwide, Alicia Balestrino (1998) gathered a group of six alumni, including Gay, for a brief conversation. Most of them credit Hofstra administrator Randy Hillebrand, himself a 1989 Hofstra graduate, for his help when they started out. “I started at Black Logic, with another group of Hofstra people,” said Balestrino. “And I was there for two and a half years. It started as an internship that Randy helped set up.”

Friends in the Field

Now at Grey for more than four years, Balestrino has four Hofstra alumni who work in her department, including Peter Andurs (2004), Michael Cruz (2002), Matt Jensen (2004), and Francesca Nicolae (2000), and she works with many more alumni throughout the agency. “Hofstra gives you a good technical background. I took specialized courses, did a lot of directing, and achieved a good understanding of post production, where I ended up,” said Balestrino. “The teachers, particularly Randy, helped me get my first job and hire five or six very good employees and interns. Whenever I need someone, I know that if they come from Hofstra they’ll have the background to understand things quickly. We have developed an internship program where every summer we take in Hofstra alumni to work with us. Whenever I need to hire, Randy is always the first person I call.”

Michael Cruz also had meaningful connections with faculty members. “[In Dempster], professors and students become one.” It is his relationship with faculty member Peter Gershon that is most memorable. “He’s always been concerned about my family. After four years of putting me through school and working really hard, they didn’t really understand what I did [at school].” Cruz recalls that he “was directing the last show of ‘Live from Studio A’ for the semester — my last show, too, as a senior — and I was concentrating on the monitors. Peter was like, ‘Hey Mike, turn around,’ and I said ‘No, I’m busy!’ Cruz smiles as he continues, “Finally after a few minutes, I had a break, I turned around and there were my parents, standing there, watching … and I had been shouting, yelling, directing, and they were just amazed, and now finally they understood what I had done [for the four years]. And Peter had brought them there to see me.”

Across the Hudson River at MSNBC Studios, Beth Anne Jones (broadcast journalism, 2001) and Dionne Slaughter (television production, 2001) have also worked with numerous Hofstra alumni.

Jones, now a production assistant on the 9 a.m. to noon morning news show on MSNBC, remembers, “I walked in here the first day and Rob Dalton, who also was a Hofstra alumnus,
was working the still store, and I looked at him and said, “Rob? You work here, too?” And Brian told me that Dionne Slaughter worked here, too, and Brandon Chase worked here before I got here.” But it was also Jones’ connection to Hofstra faculty that gave her the confidence to work at MSNBC. “My greatest mentor was Dr. Steven Knowlton. He’s got an infinite amount of knowledge and he’s so eager to impart that to his students. More than that, he wants to share his knowledge but he wants you to turn it into your own and have your own opinions, ideas, think for yourself … he definitely encouraged me to think and be outspoken about my opinions.”

Dionne Slaughter, now a segment producer, mid-days, for MSNBC, credits “Hofstra’s School of Comm and specifically Randy Hillebrand’s sense of urgency in getting us to understand the business inside out and upside down” for getting her where she is.

After graduation, Slaughter knocked on numerous doors, including MSNBC, before taking a demanding internship at the Olympic Call Center for MSNBC. Slaughter’s 80-hour weeks led to her landing an assignment as an associate producer, skipping the entry-level position. “Randy wanted us to know what it was like to be in the real world … everything he said was, it was. It is hard, you have deadlines. When I came here to MSNBC, that was what made it easier, because I knew what I was getting into, and Randy gave us that.”

For Lauren Ross (1999, speech communication), now at Time Inc., it was the “real world introduction” provided by Professor Susan Drucker that still resonates. “I just sent her a thank you e-mail about a group presentation I had to do. She gave me a lot of ‘real world’ applications to what I was learning. In creating the presentation, from start to finish, I applied things I learned, from small group communications setting, to different roles to take on, how to take on a leadership role, presentation skills and preparation techniques.”

Ross stays involved with Hofstra through her leadership role in the School of Communication Alumni Advisory Board. “Carol Drummer [then assistant dean of the School] called and asked me to get involved. It is a good way to stay involved and keep up with other SOC grads,” said Ross. “I like doing, I like to feel like I’m giving something back … organizing the auction, the happy hours, coming back for Homecoming, and especially endowing the scholarship.”

Now in its third year of existence, the Advisory Board is gearing up for the 10th anniversary celebration of the School of Communication. The Advisory Board includes more than 20 active alumni and faculty of the School, and meets regularly to enhance the connection between alumni and the faculty.

In media, in marketing and in communication companies and careers, Hofstra School of Communication alumni have a unique connection to former teachers and classmates, which connects them to career opportunities in countless ways. Perhaps Hofstra’s influence on the communications industry is best summed up by Michael Cruz, when he said, “I always said Hofstra is going to take over the world.” Through their lifelong connection and broad base of knowledge, Hofstra School of Communication alumni are poised to do just that.
Crash Course in the History of Hofstra Communications

From its humble beginnings as a single journalism course offered in 1948, to the genesis of the Communication Arts major in 1970, to the dedication of Dempster Hall in the mid-1980s as the home to many of the Communication Arts programs, the courses offered by Hofstra University in journalism, mass media, speech communication, television, radio, and film production have grown and changed as the art of communication itself has become more critical to our society.

When the School of Communication was formed in 1995, the Communication Arts and some disciplines in the Speech Arts and Sciences program (Rhetoric, Performance Studies, History) were brought together to form an interdisciplinary, liberal arts-based curriculum. The School was formed in recognition of the common interests of the two disciplines, according to Professor Lisa Merrill, professor of speech communication and rhetorical studies.

“Some faculty members in the department that was Speech Arts and Sciences and some faculty members in Communication Arts recognized that we were really together working on exchanges of messages, how they were understood by audiences, and questions of spectatorship. Many of us came out of different schools where those issues were closer together … the key schools, the national leading schools, that deal with these issues, deal with them in concert with each other.”

The theoretical underpinning of the School is critical to understanding the broad education that students receive and how it prepares them for a career or further studies after graduation. According to Patrick Infoher (communication arts/television production, 1989), president and founder of applePi Editorial, a post-production company based in New York City, “All those fundamentals are as applicable today as they were 20 years ago. Editing is editing, telling a story is storytelling, and the skills required, whether they be storyboarding, directing or writing, are the same. The nice thing is that, at Hofstra, theory and practice are blended together.”

Dr. Sybil DelGaudio, current dean and a longtime faculty member in the Audio/Video/Film Department, says, “I believe we are turning out people who not only have technical skills, but also have the intellectual skills to create. Even our programs that use technology are committed to a marriage of theory and practice.”

School of Communication Timeline

1948  First Journalism course is offered.

1953  WHCH-AM radio begins operations with a signal confined to a nine-mile radius of the campus.

1955  A specialization in Journalism is offered.

1959  WVHC goes FM – call letters “Voice of Hofstra College” is a non-commercial educational station with an assigned frequency of 88.7 megacycles. It is considered Long Island’s oldest non-commercial station.

1964  UHF Channel 21, a Long Island Public TV station, is started at Hofstra University.

1970  The Communications Department is created (Professor Frank Iezzi, chair) with nine course offerings, including Radio and Television Production, Broadcasting and Mass Communications in Contemporary Society.

1972  Faculty in the department increases to 18 members; the number of Communication majors reaches 200.

1972  The Communications Club held its first Film Festival, which debuted four videotaped films created, directed and produced by Hofstra students.

1978  The radio station goes from 320 watts to 570 watts with its antenna 190 feet above ground atop one of the 14-story residence halls on North Campus.

1983  Call letters for radio station are changed to WRHU – “Radio Hofstra University.”

1983  For the first time in its history, Hofstra’s student-run television station presents five news shows, five days a week. “Five Minute Update” taught broadcast journalism students how to work under pressure.

1983  Plans for the construction of a $4 million dollar facility to house the Hofstra Television Institute are announced. The building will contain 30,000 square feet of space and four television production studios, and will house the Journalism and Film Departments.

1986  George Dempster Hall is dedicated May 22, 1986.

1989  Filming of Murdered Innocence begins; the film marks the first time in years that Nassau County is used for a movie. Hofstra’s Television Institute is used as the locale for the studio work.

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1995  Board of Trustees approves the formation of the School of Communication.

1999  August 28 is the first day of classes for the School of Communication. The School features one of the largest state-of-the-art non-commercial radio and television broadcast facilities on the East Coast. One of the new faculty members is Robert Greene, Newsday’s Pulitzer Prize-winning editor.

2001  A major in Public Relations is offered to students.

2002  The School of Communication announces its first M.A. in Speech Communication and Rhetorical Studies.

2003  The Department of Journalism and Mass Media Studies becomes the youngest and one of only five departments in New York State to win accreditation from the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.