

Public Relations Pros

By Melissa Field Sherman '86

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There's a sucker born every minute," laughed P.T. Barnum when angry customers realized that many of his sideshow freaks were hoaxes. Some people still believe the job of public relations practitioners is to find new suckers and spin them a story. But not all practitioners are descendants of the great showman. For nearly 30 years, Rowan University's graduate program in PR has prepared students for successful communications careers of a decidedly un-Barnum nature. Here we showcase five alumni recognized for their contributions to the field.

Kathleen Mueller Scott 74

After one term in the graduate program at the University of Tennessee, Kathleen Scott knew that she didn't want to study English literature anymore. "There was nothing wrong with the program," explains Scott. "I just knew that it wasn't what I wanted to do." So, armed with her B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Scott began her career in public relations in 1968 at a 30,000-student public school district in Wisconsin.

The district sent Scott to several conferences, and it was during one held in Minneapolis that she heard Don Bagin speak—"Not so much about public relations," remembers Scott, "but about communications." With five years of work experience behind her, Scott was looking for professional validation and credentials. This search, meeting Bagin at the conference, and other factors coalesced to bring her to GSC for the graduate program in public relations. "With a safety net in place"—she took a leave of absence from her position—Scott relocated to New Jersey, where she found that the program "was good, with hands-on opportunities."



She stresses that her assistantship in the Office of Community Relations taught her as much about communications as the actual course work. "I was in a group of forward-thinking, public relations practitioners," says Scott, "a group of people who shared similar ideas and were able to teach others." Serving as the National School Public Relations Association's representative to a Kettering Foundation Task Force also contributed to her positive experience. "It was all a process leading to a certain level of maturity and confidence," says Scott of her early work experience and GSC degree.

Shortly after graduation, Scott went to the National School Boards Association, first in Evanston, Ill., later in Washington, D.C., where she spent the next three years working on publications and a policy codification system. When she married and moved to Southern California, Scott sought an opportunity to translate her education and eight years of non-profit experience into a job in the business sector.

University Group, Inc., a financial services firm, offered her that chance in 1978. She served as vice president of corporate communications until 1985, when she moved on to a position as senior vice president with Angeles Corporation, an investment management firm. She also headed corporate and marketing communications

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there and, for a time, served as chief operating officer for a securities subsidiary. During that time Scott earned her M.B.A. in marketing from the University of Southern California.

In 1991 she went to Transamerica Life Companies, Los Angeles, where she served as vice president of corporate communications. In 1995, after a period of freelancing, Scott joined Sheppard Associates, where she is currently senior vice president. Sheppard, which was recently acquired by Ketchum, specializes in employee communications—helping clients present business strategies, corporate changes, and benefit plans to employees.

Although Scott admits, “I do identify myself through my work,” she has managed to strike a balance between family, personal interests, and work. Her three stepchildren and four grand- sons all live within an easy drive of the Los Angeles-area home she and her husband share with their two dogs. Scott has been active in United Way (Los Angeles– Western Region) and has served as a Regent for Mount St. Mary’s College in Los Angeles.

John “Jack” R. Wilson 68,73

When bad weather hits, Jack Wilson is grateful for his easy commute—about 45 or 50 yards from his loft home in downtown Chicago to the offices of his video production and publishing company, JWA/Video. Up at 4:45 a.m. to walk his dogs, Wilson is usually at his desk by 8:30 a.m. to “do the business of doing business.”

That business, which Wilson launched in 1985, began as a venture in the production and marketing of video programs for broadcast and home/business use, including training videos. The conventional approach to such projects is to secure a well-known personality—called talent—to present the topic, and Wilson’s company worked with that formula to develop videos for a number of clients. Then, in 1989, Wilson’s company began creating its own products, choosing to concentrate on training videos. Wilson turned the training video



concept inside out by focusing on the topic rather than the talent, greatly reducing production costs and thus enabling the company to secure a place in the “\$99.95 market”—quality training videos at a reasonable price. With 107 distributors worldwide and a catalogue circulation of 2.5 million, JWA/Video has been enjoying success with bestsellers like “The Power of Customer Service.”

Not bad for someone who admits that his high school guidance counselor was lukewarm about his pursuing college. “He basically said, ‘Don’t bother,’” laughs Wilson. But Wilson headed to GSC to study history anyway, graduating in 1968. After four years of service as an officer in the U.S. Army in Europe and Vietnam, Wilson returned to GSC for the graduate program in public relations. “It was the best place for the program,” says Wilson. “I feel that and I hear it from people, too.” More than the excellent reality- and skill-based training that he received in the classroom, relationships nurtured Wilson’s talents—relationships with professors and students alike. “The people I worked with helped me develop



my skills,” reflects Wilson.

After graduation and a stint in Philadelphia radio, Wilson moved to Chicago, first to a position in community relations—in which he worked with the first school district to cross-bus its students—then to WTTW, the city’s public television station. In his 11 years with the station, he worked his way from assistant producer to vice president of marketing and development. “When I went out on my own after that,” says Wilson, recalling his work with WTTW, “I felt like I had done a lot—production, marketing, public relations.”

Aided by a staff of “young, smart, fun” people, the Emmy-Award-winning Wilson has formed several successful partnerships with other firms in recent years to work on such projects as videos that teach children to read and programs featuring Dr. Christiane Northrup, author of *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Choices*.

His company’s philosophy is simply stated: “Corporate conscience. Have fun. Make money.” And Wilson is particular about the order in which his three tenets are executed. “You have to do for others first,” he insists. And this isn’t idle do-good talk: Wilson is active in such organizations as Easter Seals, which awarded him its “Communicator of the Year Award,” and Chicago’s Anti-Hunger Federation, for which he produces an annual 24-hour fundraising radiothon.

“Everything is attitude,” Wilson believes. “You really are what you think you are.”

David J. Byrd 86

Some kids learn sports or carpentry from their dads. David Byrd learned civic activism and grassroots politics from his. “I grew up in a political household,” says Byrd. “My father was an aide to the mayor of Newark. Politics was like a family hobby.” And Byrd parlayed that hobby into a career that has taken him to positions at every level of government—local, county, state and federal.

After earning his B.A. in English at Ohio Wesleyan University, Byrd began his career as a senior information assis-

tant for Ocean County Parks and Recreation in New Jersey. He learned about GSC's graduate program in public relations from a small, complimentary mention in *The New York Times* but didn't do anything with the information until he was faced with the need for a change. "I knew exactly what I wanted from the program," Byrd says, citing professional credibility and earning potential. "A lot of people think public relations is just 'happy talk,'" he continues, "but the GSC program taught me how to be a communications professional based on research." Three years after graduation, he was planning events held in the Rose Garden.

Yes, things happened quickly for Byrd. After a short period as director of customer relations for Communication Briefings, he landed a position as public information officer for Ewing Township Public Schools. Then, in the spring of 1989, a friend who was working for then New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean called Byrd to advise him that he was a contender for a position with the Republican National Committee. "I fell into the political game by accident," laughs Byrd. "Someone was willing to pay me for what, up until then, I had always done for fun." He served as liaison activity director for the Committee's outreach division until 1990, traveling all over the country to recruit and train Republican leaders and coordinating receptions for them at the White House. "I used to wake up every morning thinking, 'I can't wait to get dressed and get to work,'" Byrd says of his early days in Washington, D.C.

Byrd went to work for the U.S. Department of Education and then the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in the early '90s, gaining a reputation as someone who could take tough situations and get them back on track. While at Health and Human Services, for example, Byrd sifted through child abuse and foster-care policy issues and drafted a "Memorandum of Understanding" that coordinated the efforts of seven federal Cabinet members

and their agencies. His work earned him a "Superior Service Award" from the Department because it greatly accelerated the Federal Child Abuse and Neglect Initiative. "I didn't know anything about those issues when I took on the assignment," remembers Byrd, "but if you can write well, you can learn anything."

Byrd left politics for a short time to work in the private sector. Then, in 1994, he accepted a position as special assistant in the New Jersey Governor's Office. Byrd believes that this opportunity was about more than his career. "Maybe it was divine providence," he speculates: His father had died in December 1993, and Byrd's return to New Jersey enabled him to help his mother through a difficult time. In 1996, Byrd was appointed associate commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Commerce and Economic Development. And after the privatization of the Department, he became director of the Small Business Division of New Jersey Commerce and Economic Growth Commission.

Elegantly summarizing his career, Byrd says, "Embrace change. Over the last 14 years, I've had 12 different jobs, lived in two different states, been laid off twice, and saw a company I worked for declare bankruptcy. It's a roller coaster."

Debra P. DiLorenzo 76, 87

Debra DiLorenzo has demonstrated that you don't need to go much beyond your own backyard to achieve success. Born and educated in South Jersey, she now enjoys a professional reputation that penetrates the complex networks of both state government and business. "No one really goes out of circulation in New Jersey," confides DiLorenzo. "I've got four Rolodexes that help me reach the people I've known and worked with over the last 20 years."

DiLorenzo, who has served as president of the Chamber of Commerce of Southern Jersey since 1994, built her career on twin interests: communications and politics. She first recognized her aptitude for communications when

she took a mass media class as a college sophomore. "I remember thinking, 'Oh, I could do this. I love this!'" says DiLorenzo. She went to work for the mayor of Camden shortly after graduation from GSC in 1976 and quickly realized that lobbying—the perfect blend of her communications skills and keen interest in politics—was where her career was headed.

In 1979, she began a 11-year tenure with South Jersey Gas Company. In her early years there, she monitored state legislation that affected the company, such as changes in utility, labor and environmental laws. She then developed comprehensive responses that communicated the company's position on key issues. "Lobbying is like teaching," maintains DiLorenzo. "You work with



lawmakers to show them which of the many pieces of legislation crossing their desks are important to the business community—particularly, your company." By 1987, DiLorenzo was manager of government relations and, with that promotion, decided, "I needed more education under my belt."

She toyed with the idea of attending law school but concluded that it was more important to be a strong, competent communicator. DiLorenzo returned to GSC for the graduate program in public relations, and, despite the struggle to maintain her rigorous work schedule and meet family obligations, felt lucky to be working while studying. "The graduate program was really hands-on," she remembers. "Those of us already in the field had the advantage of using our class projects

for work.” Her studies and her professors, particularly Don Bagin, changed DiLorenzo’s perspective, including how she studied and how she presented herself. “Everything starts with research,” says DiLorenzo. “It all starts there.”

DiLorenzo’s long association with South Jersey Gas Company ended in 1990, after she had held the positions of general manager, assistant vice president, and vice president of external relations. She left to become senior vice president of government affairs for the New Jersey Business Association, where she planned and directed the activities of a professional lobbying staff. “This was the front-line lobbying job I had always wanted,” recalls DiLorenzo. “I loved it!”

The birth of her second child made DiLorenzo re-evaluate her long hours and two-hour commute and consider the offer of the Chamber of Commerce of Southern New Jersey, the state’s largest chamber of commerce. Under her guidance as chief executive and administrative officer, the Chamber has doubled both revenues and membership in the last five years, and the job has exceeded her best expectations.

DiLorenzo also contributes her skills and energy to numerous volunteer efforts. She is particularly proud of her involvement with the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation, which has built the first education center in the country dedicated to the Vietnam War.

Richard D. Bagin '73

I realized I could have a bigger impact on education by working with the whole community,” Rich Bagin says of his decision to leave the teaching profession more than 25 years ago. “And,” he concedes, “I recognized the financial inequities of teaching. I knew I would never realize any of my financial goals, no matter how well I performed.” Motivated by the seemingly opposing ideals of serving others and reaping personal rewards, Bagin headed to GSC, where his brother, Don Bagin, chaired the graduate program in public relations.

“The program was about nitty-gritty tactics and a style of how to perform,” says Bagin, who earned his undergraduate degree at West Chester State College. “Essentially, what they said was, ‘The better people do it this way,’ and then they led you that way.” Before he even finished the program, Bagin was employed by the Centennial School District, applying his new skills and benefitting from an “accelerated” income potential.

In 1973, after completing his graduate degree, Bagin went to work for the Bensalem School District in Pennsylvania. Like many public relations practitioners, he began by writing press releases, but, as Bagin says, “I knew what to do. I had learned the skills and the knowledge at GSC, and I knew how to apply them.” He went on to develop



award-winning external and internal communication programs, including newsletters recognized nationally for their quality and effectiveness. As communications director and later as assistant superintendent, Bagin handled such crisis situations as employee strikes and federal indictments of school district architects and legal counsel, usually while enjoying community confidence and media support.

In 1981, Bagin moved to the Washington, D.C., area to direct communications and development for the Council of Chief State School Officers. In addition to setting up communications projects and implementing a successful grant-writing program, Bagin also developed an electronic network that predated e-mail. Three years later, he became director of professional development for the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), where he was responsible for creating training materials

and activities that would help school public relations officers and, in districts too small for a separate staff, superintendents do their jobs more effectively. “There are still people out in the field who don’t anticipate the ‘what-ifs,’” says Bagin. “They need to realize they’re part of the management team and not limit themselves to writing press releases.”

After three years with NSPRA, Bagin moved into the private sector, as senior vice president for Earle Palmer Brown and then Ketchum in Washington, D.C. The transition was easily made, he believes, because the grounding was there from his GSC studies, as well as his non-profit experience. “I did have trouble spending all the clients’ money,” laughs Bagin, “but I gave them a lot more than they expected.” He applied a more integrated approach to public relations in his corporate tenure, encompassing both marketing and advertising.

In 1992, he was again approached by NSPRA, which was near bankruptcy and in need of reorganization. Where he once saw little room for advancement, Bagin now perceived an excellent opportunity. He accepted the challenge of rebuilding the organization and now serves as executive director. Plans for the coming year include the release of videos about school violence and crisis management, as well as another book.

Simply stated, the programs and training materials that Bagin has developed with NSPRA set the industry standard. He is the author of such NSPRA publications as *Evaluating Your School Public Relations Investment* and *Planning Your School Public Relations Investment* and has written and edited others. He has conducted communications audits and led workshops for school districts and education associations throughout the country. Accredited by both NSPRA and the Public Relations Society of America, Bagin leads a national community of school public relations professionals, certainly proving to have “a big impact on education” by serving a million educators and their students tenfold. ■