

ALUMNI NEWSLETTER SPRING 2016

The “Redbirds of a Feather” Issue

A FREE BIRD IN PR:

LISA CROCCO By Ashlyn
Gramm

“Birds of a feather, flock together.” It’s true! Through a single conversation through email, I instantly felt a connection with Lisa Crocco, who is an alumna of Illinois State University public relations program. As a first-year member of the ISU Chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America, I jumped at the chance to interview and write an article about a former ISU PRSSA executive board member and current public relations professional.

Crocco served as the 2012-2013 vice president for ISU PRSSA. However, her journey to becoming a public relations and marketing freelancer did not originate in the public relations field. Crocco started her career at ISU as a journalism major with a political science minor. After taking the “Introduction to Public Relations” course and attending a few ISU PRSSA meetings, Crocco decided to pursue a degree in public relations instead of journalism.

During her time as chapter vice president, Crocco caught a glimpse of the public relations world and what it meant to be a professional. She learned how to accomplish dozens of tasks under tight deadlines, while a chapter of 100 members looked to her leadership throughout the academic school year. Crocco’s experience as an executive board member instilled in her both skills and knowledge, which she

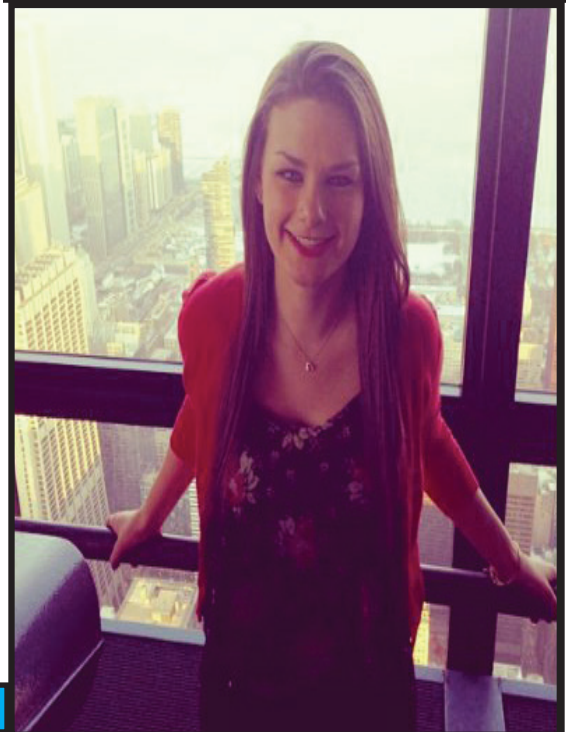
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FROM NEST TO FULL FLIGHT - DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI RELATIONS DUQUENNE CONNECTS REDBIRD ALUMNI BACK TO THE NEST

By Deja Whitt

As director of alumni relations at Illinois State University, Stephanie Duquenne is no stranger to stark difference between an ISU education and an ISU experience. By utilizing her resources as a student, Duquenne made the transformation from student to staff and now works to help Redbirds bridge the gap between student and alumni, proving that Redbirds of a feather really do flock together.

Duquenne received her bachelor's degree in public relations in 2004 from Illinois State University. "I was always interested in the study of communication and the public relations track fit what I was most interested in – working with the public to help an organization move towards a goal," she said of why she chose public relations. "I have also always had a passion for nonprofit so that is where I focused my internship and class projects as an undergraduate." Duquenne worked in various subfields of public relations, including radio advertising, promotional events, and nonprofit fundraising before making her way back to ISU to begin her master's degree. It was around this time that she began her work with the ISU Alumni Relations office.

"I have learned the 'other' side of higher education. by working as an administrative professional, meaning I see the work that goes into not only planning something as large as commencement but the



relationship building it takes to raise the much needed donations for student scholarships and academic space," she said of the benefits that came with being both student and staff. "ISU is a wonderful place to work and the experience I get from my time here has helped me grow into the professional I am today."

It is through her role as director of alumni relations that Duquenne is able to focus on three main parts of alumni engagement; contact, project management, and advising. Duquenne serves as the contact for all the departments, student organizations, and alumni that wish to plan a reunion event. In doing so, she is able to take the steps necessary to help execute all reunion events that take place on campus. Duquenne is also responsible for managing large projects, namely the annual ISU Homecoming week celebration. Tasks range from message development to marketing outreach plans, to event planning to logistical management. Advising is the last component of Duquenne's role. She advises a student group on campus called the

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SOARING TO SUCCESS: ABIGAIL BRENNAN ON STAYING CONNECTED TO THE NEST

By Audie Lauf



Seniors experience their lasts at the end of the semester. The last time they will walk the corridors of Fell Hall, the last time they will meet friends at The Rock for lunch, or the last morning they grab an Americano from Coffee Hound. Time spent at Illinois State University is an unforgettable experience. As graduation approaches for seniors, their journeys are just beginning; however, just because you are graduating from Illinois State University does not mean the connection with the university ends. Abigail Brennan, a past Executive Board member of the Illinois State University Chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America, took time out of her busy schedule as a young professional working in Chicago to answer a few questions about her time at ISU.

Brennan reflects on her ISU memories and her relationship with the university after two years. Brennan currently works as an assistant account executive at

Weber Shandwick in the Chicago office. Brennan remembers her early mornings in Milner Library and late nights at Fell Hall. Her path to the public relations program was not traditional. She came to ISU her freshmen year with passions for theatre and one day experienced an epiphany that public relations was the right fit.

“I knew ISU was for me once I transferred to the public relations program. The combination of creative and strategic thinking was just perfect. I have always loved writing, media and digital,” said Brennan.

Brennan believes it was her time management skills that led her to gain a well-established connection with Illinois State University.

Brennan said, “The internships and positions I took while school was in session taught me how to prioritize and balance my time – between executive board, School of Communication Promotions and Development, my responsibilities as an undergraduate teacher’s assistant, a part-time job and a full academic course load, I was a busy bee. I spent more time in Fell Hall than probably any other place on campus, and I would not have it any other way.”

After graduating Magna Cum Laude in 2014, Brennan still has a strong relationship with her favorite professors and the university in general.

“I stay in touch with my professors. Dr.

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MEET ISU ALUMNA, BREE WITT

By Kelly Larson



Bree Witt has had her fair share in variety within the public relations profession. She thanks her time at Illinois State University for teaching her the importance of making deadlines and providing her with the basic skills she needed to bust out in the public relations field. After graduating from ISU, Witt landed an internship with an agency in Chicago and worked her way up. She has worked for one of the largest PR firms in the world, as well as in-house public relations. Witt also invites students and recent graduates to always reach out to her for advice on how to make it in the public relations industry.

1. What is your PR story?

“I sort of fell into public relations with a little luck and guidance from a classmate. Initially, I majored in marketing at Illinois State University. I am not a numbers person, but I enjoyed the theories behind marketing. After a couple of rough semesters with classes like economics, statistics, a math class and two different accounting classes, I talked to a classmate and she suggested I switch to public relations major. I made the switch and loved my communication classes. After graduating, I did not really know which avenue of public relations I wanted to take, but a friend’s sister worked at an advertising and public relations agency in Chicago and I talked with her about the possibilities. I ended up interning at the agency, Cramer Krasselt, then getting hired on as an assistant account executive. I worked there for a few years before leaving for Edelman, one of the world’s leading communications marketing firms. I have worked both on the agency side and in-house, gaining great experience in a range of industries including consumer product goods (CPG), tech, healthcare, travel, higher education and financial services. I currently work as the associate public relations director at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.”

2. Why has it been important for you to stay connected with Illinois State University as an alumna?

“I was not very engaged as a student in the Illinois State University Chapter of the

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Public Relations Student Society of America or other activities that could have helped me kick start my career in public relations. I feel as though I was lucky to get a start in public relations through my internship at Cramer Krasselt, and my entire career (10 years in the industry) has been shaped by that one internship. I realized how crucial it is for students to become engaged with professionals in their fields both during and after college in order to help uncover and open up new opportunities. Like me, so many students or recent graduates do not have a good understanding on how best to pursue their major out of college—where to start, how to get your feet in the door, where to go after that first job, etc. I welcome the chance to meet with students and graduates to provide insight, share my story or just serve as a sounding board for young professionals going through the process of finding their way in public relations.”

3. If you could go back in time to when you were at ISU, what advice would you give yourself knowing what you know now based on your career?

“Meet as many people as you can in the field and stay in touch with your classmates who work in public relations. Go to PRSSA events, reach out to alumni already working in the field, contact public relations professionals who work at the companies you would want to work for to set up informational interviews and join the Public Relations Society of America once you graduate. These are all easy things you can do that will help open doors for you throughout your entire career.”

4. What is one piece of advice that you gained at ISU that still resonates with you today?

“It is not necessarily a piece of advice, but the thing that most resonated with me while at ISU was the importance of meeting deadlines. In my capstone public relations class senior year, my professor, Dr. Moffitt, required the students to turn in the sections of our communications strategy that were due by midnight every Thursday. We would have to drive to her house, often racing the clock, and drop them off in a bin that she kept on her front porch. It made me realize that the work does not end when you turn in your project—in this case, she was waiting every Thursday with the porch light on for us to drop off our work so she could start her work of reviewing the 15+ pages of each section. This is something that resonated with me throughout my profession: It is so important to meet your deadline so that the work can continue moving forward in a timely manner in someone else’s hands. The work does not end when you have finished your part.”

FROM NEST TO FULL FLIGHT CONTINUED

Student Alumni Council who are responsible for hosting events and opportunities for connecting current students with alumni as well as message management and execution for new graduates. Duquenne truly embodies the public relations practice of “wearing many hats” as she juggles the many different responsibilities that her role encompasses.

Since working at ISU, Duquenne has learned many things about herself, college students and the craft. “I have learned that I like to work in the fast-paced world of higher education and that our students have so much to offer,” she said. “We, ISU employees, are in a unique role of making sure we take time to build, grow and utilize these students before they leave campus. As an alumni relation’s professional, I have the role of continuing these relationships and keeping alumni engaged in ISU as they move on from being a student.”

Duquenne’s goal in her role is to ultimately keep current and future alumni connected to ISU. Her unique experiences should encourage future and current students to utilize every opportunity within their reach. The same opportunities and connections that we are offered now are the very ones that Duquenne credits her success. “It was absolutely my classroom work here at ISU and the relationships I made through my internship and first jobs,” she said. “The faculty here are terrific resources and truly want to see students succeed.” With the help of the bonds she made through her ISU experience as a student, she continues to help make the university a great place to be as staff. Now she’s helping other Redbirds take flight, and even guiding some back to the nest for a visit in the process.

SOARING TO SUCCESS CONTINUED

Hayes and Dr. Smudde are rock stars; soak up their knowledge, especially while you are right there on campus. Dr. Smudde and I text message during almost every Chicago Black Hawks game. My senior gift I donated went straight to ISU PRSSA,” said Brennan.

Establishing and maintaining a relationship with ISU ultimately led to Brennan’s success as a publicist in a competitive industry. When asked about her emotions crossing the stage during commencement Brennan stated, “It was bittersweet, that’s for sure. But also surreal... like I distinctly remember sitting in my packed-up apartment with my mom and eating Jimmy John’s on the floor, but I had my diploma, and that was just weird but also kind of perfect.”

When asked if she had any advice for current students Brennan said, “At the end of the day, specific classes, internships and positions do not necessarily mean that much on their own. What matters is your overall experience; what you learned, the skills you gained, and how that can help shape your career.”