

Fordham Footsteps: A Conversation With Denise Ramirez, GABELLI '14, '15

- Matt: Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from student life to their current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns.
- Sara: Either way, expect the insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni.
- Matt: I'm Matt Burns, Associate Director for Young Alumni and Student Engagement.
- Sara: And I'm Sarah Hunt Munoz, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives.
- Matt: With us today is Denise Ramirez. Denise is a Gabelli 2014 undergraduate and I believe 2015?
- Denise: Yeah.
- Matt: And what was that graduate degree was it an MBA?
- Denise: Yes, dual accounting degree. So once you did the four years in undergrad here, [you] do all the rest in the one year.
- Matt: Got ya.
- Denise: All the rest of the credits.
- Sara: And was accounting your passion, is that the route you thought you'd love?
- Denise: Well, I really enjoyed accounting. I mean I've always loved math since I was a little kid. Always. That was like my favorite subject. So I figured once I got into business school, which is something that I've considered when I was applying to colleges besides music, which we'll get to--my music career. I was doing that along the sidelines. My high school actually had several academies, so they split it up. Academies which were kind of majors but for high schoolers. So I ended up going to the business major version of that in high school and I liked it. So I figured I'd continue doing that.
- Matt: So what made you pick the five year program?
- Denise: Well, it made sense with the career goals I had in mind at that time. Once you go through that track, your next goal is to get your CPA and kind of just work in that field. It was actually a great opportunity that Fordham gave to be able to just do it cause I think

you would try to switch schools. I think they would have you do it in two years or so it made sense at the time. So I figured I'd do it and then try to take the CPA test and you know, continue on that track.

Sara: And I think I saw that you actually worked in the controller's office as a student.

Denise: Yeah! Actually my summer of sophomore year they had the--work study program? I think that's what I went through. So they have obviously desk assistant, all those other positions. One of the people in the work study placement program was like, "Oh, you're in accounting, this actually sounds perfect for you". So they found me a summer job at the controller's office. And I had a great time learning about actually a lot of those organizational skills were super applicable once I moved into my internship my senior year and further on. So it was a good experience.

Sara: Yeah, because not all those student worker jobs are applicable to your major and just sort of random.

Denise: Yeah.

Matt: You could actually pack your resume in the process.

Denise: Yeah, exactly.

Matt: So what were those career aspirations?

Denise: If I wasn't gonna to work in music, which was my actual passion, I always figured I would go somewhere in the business world using the math skills because that's always something I enjoyed. So once I figured accounting was a good one, I would use that, try to get some experience in accounting. Really enjoyed the auditing part of it, so that was going to be my next goal and then try to use that to open up a business of my own in the future. But I kind of turned away from that once I figured I could make a living in music, that was solid.

Sara: And how did you stroke your passion while you were a student? What kinds of things did you get involved in that were musically oriented?

Denise: Fordham had a lot of a capella groups as Matt knows. We were both in the Fordham Hot Notes together and the a capella culture on the Rose Hill Campus was super huge. Because I made so many friends in there and choir, it was a really good support system to try to keep that passion going. And besides that--I mean I was pretty heavily involved in both. I think Hot Notes took up a lot of my free time.

Matt: Can you talk about that for a second? Because for those who don't know, the Hot Notes are a relatively new group and you were there essentially at the beginning.

Denise: I was. I think the second year that it was actually made into a club.

Matt: What did that do for you having to be involved kind of at the ground floor in starting a musical group?

Denise: Well I remember even just getting organizationally more in tune was kind of a process. That first year I think even coming in it felt a little bit chaotic. You guys were still trying to find your grounding. And then I remember the next year there was a lot of work getting rehearsals...I mean everyone had their own other things that they were doing, like the FET group and everyone had their own majors too that weren't in music. So getting a group of people to come in...and we also had aspirations to try to go to competition and try to win. So it was a process getting rehearsals in and trying to figure out just how much rehearsal it would take and just how much work it would take to get a group of 16 people to get it to those stages.

Sara: And did you end up going to competitions or what did you?

Denise: Yeah, that was the first year we ended up going to ICCAs. We made the first round and it was a really good experience. Obviously we still had a lot of work to do and ever since then, I mean that group has been going and going to competitions. I think they made it to the quarter finals, at least the quarter finals this past year or the year before. I can't remember. But they've grown quite a bit since we started.

Matt: You did quite a bit of actual [musical] arranging yourself.

Denise: Yeah, that was super fun because I'd never done it. And the Hot Notes, being a part of it like gave me the chance to be able to try my hand at that and try arranging for the first time for a bunch of friends. A lot of chances, new opportunities to try to expand my horizons there in music because I don't think without hot notes I would've been able to try to make arrangements.

Sara: For all those Pugsley's fans, all those chicken roll lovers--talk a little bit with what you did at Pugsley's.

Denise: Oh yeah. Oh my goodness. Well my friend Bobby who was in Hot Notes as well, him and I--he was a business major as well--we decided we wanted another venue--cause we did have Rodrigue's on campus, where you could do the battle of the bands, and I think they had open mic nights once in awhile, but besides that we didn't really have any outlets unless they were like club sponsored: like open mic nights or like karaoke nights. There wasn't really like a regular kind of thing. So we wanted to try to start just another kind of like open mic night series for people to show their work.

Denise: So we talked to Pugsley's and it seemed like such a good venue to-

Sara: That downstairs?

Denise: Yeah. That downstairs venue and we're like, it's not really being used. And a lot of people come to Pugsley's anyway. You know, so Bobby and I a couple of times we ended

up going to Sal and we were like, how can we make this work? So we tried it for the first time. The first time was super successful.

Sara: It wasn't an open mic night or was it?

Denise: It was an open mic night. So we had the Fordham Hot Notes come perform. I think the second time around we had one of the comedy groups on campus come and be the performers for the night.

Denise: I mean that was the end of our junior year. So after that we kind of just ran out of time and we were like looking for our own internships and we're like, "I don't know how we can balance this like with our own majors". But it was a good idea and it--definitely like good real world experience of trying to start your own business and trying to make music a part of that too. So we enjoyed it but--we still talk about it once in a while cause we still have the social media pages up for it. And they're still up there if anyone wants to go look at it.

Matt: Carry the torch.

Sara: It's called Sessions at Pugsley's?

Denise: Sessions at Pugsleys. If anyone wants to continue that, at Fordham, it's there.

Matt: Actually in your first gig out of school, what was it?

Denise: So, senior year? Yes, the beginning of senior year or maybe it was towards the end in the middle of the summer I was just looking, applying to a bunch of internships, see what I could land and I came across David Monn, which is an event planning company, interviewed with them and then decided to go through with the internship and it was actually really cool because I was able to see a way to use accounting in more of a creative kind of world cause they did a lot of design--a lot of design aspects were involved in that company. I understand big four accounting experiences, certainly very valuable and a lot of people go in there, come out, very experienced, grateful for the knowledge they've learned there. But I think for what I was trying to do, trying to use accounting more as a tool, I think it was very helpful cause I got to see inside personally how I could use my accounting degree and apply that to some to a business that wasn't necessarily just the business aspect of it.

Sara: Almost like a business within a liberal arts environment.

Denise: Yeah, exactly. Yes. So that was incredibly helpful and I was really grateful to have a very supportive, like the controller was super supportive and helping me learn a bunch of stuff. When she had to leave very suddenly, so I ended up learning very quickly a bunch of stuff that, she just threw on the, threw on the plate for me to pick up really quickly. Yeah. And then I just started learning a bunch about--whenever they would hire like performing companies to come play for their events. I started learning more about that

too through them. So that was kind of helpful for me to see. Like that's how they do the process for like hiring bands or--

Matt: Contracting?

Denise: Contracting. That. Yeah, so that was, that was helpful actually to my music career because I got to know some names and the music industry here.

Sara: So keep an ear out you'll never know what you are going to hear.

Denise: You'll never know, yeah. Actually when I was looking for jobs in the music industry, I would like remember those names and I was like, might as well send some audition tapes there maybe I'll throw in the name and be like, I worked with David Monn, hopefully you'll recognize the name there so it'll ring a bell for you.

Sara: So when did you decide you were going to make that change from accounting to the performing arts?

Denise: Actually, I happened to be out with some friends and Howl at the Moon had offered a happy hour to them and so it was like, might as well go free drinks and free food.

Matt: Just to clarify to folks here we're not talking about Howl at the Moon up at Rose Hill.

Denise: Oh, not the Rose Hill--I remember telling people about that I got a job at the Howl at the Moon and they were like, "Oh, that's so sad".

Denise: They were like, "You didn't move out of the neighborhood". But yeah, no, it's a Howl at the Moon, the corporation, so they're a dueling piano company and they used to have a club open here in New York and I ended up going to their happy hour and watching the dueling pianos play. I was like, that looks just like the funnest time ever. And I think I could do something like that. I--maybe if I tried my hand at it, so by the end of the night and just been like watching them and just admiring them from afar. They probably thought I was a weirdo. That's fine. So I went up to one of them and said, "Hey, how, how did you get involved in this?" And then he just told me the audition process and so I went home, I worked, worked on a couple of songs sent an audition tape, talked to one of the entertainment directors there at the time and auditioned for him and started getting involved there.

Denise: So I started training and then I became a full time player.

Sara: So were you working in accounting at the time or you had left that?

Denise: I was doing that during the day while I was training because [while] training you don't get like the full time pay. So I was like, I'm going just try to balance the both at the same time. And then once I was pretty much done with training, I was like, okay, I can just do this as a full time job. Yeah. And my focus became music. So then I was in the New York

club until they closed in December...2016, I think now? And then I ended up moving to the San Antonio club in 2017 and have been with them since.

Sara: And you love it?

Denise: I love it so much. It's such a fun job. Honestly. I've always said music has always been my passion.

Denise: It's very hard, especially growing up and your parents just want to make sure that you have like a stable career, you know they want---so they were always very supportive of me playing music. But I think they also understood that it's a very hard industry to get into. And especially if you're not like spectacularly talented, you don't have like the voice of a star or don't play amazingly. Like it's very, it's very hard out there.

Sara: Do you have any musical training? Did you grow up in music?

Denise: Yeah. So I've been playing piano since I was six years old, classically. I've played forever. And then just singing as I was growing up, played violin also since I was seven. I picked up guitar in high school, kind of. Everyone picks up guitar in high school.

Matt: We all do.

Denise: Everyone does it. And then just kind of, I've been involved in choir since high school and then a capella too in college. I was like kind of always just had music on this side as a hobby growing up.

Matt: And you were still gigging, you were playing coffee shops up in Hamilton Heights; at the Brooklyn Brewery; and doing couple of things.

Sara: Yeah I was still doing a bunch of stuff even while I was working in accounting cause I, it's hard to just let something like that go. So it was just trying to keep that alive on the side. So.

Matt: When you say, "Hey, I work at Howl at the Moon, dueling piano bar", what does that mean? For us nine-to-fivers here.

Sara: What's an average night to you? What does it mean?

Denise: Basically the stage is set up with two pianos in front of each other and most dueling piano gigs are set up that way. You just have like two pianos and two players. Usually it's very, it's super interactive with the crowd, which is generally why a lot of dueling piano shows get put on for like weddings and like corporate events. You get to like interact with the crowd a lot, just like make jokes with them, have a good time and it's request based. So you've have requests slips on the table usually that like the customers can just fill out and just put on whatever song and bring them up to the stage and we'll try to play a request if we know it. If we don't know it, then it's really hard to try to fulfill that request. Yeah, so that's what usually a typical night starts out like and Howl at the Moon

has also like a backline portion of it. So we have drums, bass, and guitar. Sometimes the violin, I'll pull out the fiddle and play something and towards the middle to the end of the night, especially if we have a younger crowd and it's the weekend we'll have the backline going and it'll be kind of just like a live band.

Sara: Is every night different?

Denise: Every night is super different because it's so heavily reliant on the crowd. That's like another whole skill set to like work on like after accounting I was like, I can do music, but this is like a whole other thing I need to learn, because you need to be prepared for whatever requests people are coming to bring up to you. Like you have to be on top of your game, like talking to people all the time and you're like, you never know what they're going to say. Yeah. So whole different ballgame, whole different skillset. But yeah, because it's so reliant on the crowd's energy and what they want. The show is always different every night. You could have a night where you have a group of people who just want to sit at the bar and listen to slow ballads and they'll request a bunch of Adele.

Denise: The next night you could have people who want ragers and like are requesting EDM or like hip hop and rap. I'm like, all right, well if you ask for it. So yeah. So and those nights ended up being super fun cause you're just like, okay well I'm going to do what I can with like piano and my voice.

Matt: So do you have a sense of dread every time a new top 40 chart comes out, and you're like, "These are all the songs I have to learn"?

Denise: Yeah, it's been super interesting and my colleagues can certainly attest to like the music industry is always changing and tastes are always changing. And the top 40 list today, honestly, it's super hard to find something like super catchy. There's certain songs out there, but it's learning a new kind of way to play every time. And you're like, what songs are going to go over well? What songs aren't going to go over well?

Sara: Do you rehearse together?

Denise: We sometimes rehearse together. If it's like a more complicated song that we can't pick up or it's a really popular song that you know we need to like get down perfectly. So it's open seven days a week. But we're there mostly four or five nights a week depending on, so it's like it's a full time job.

Matt: So how much time do you spend practicing?

Denise: It depends honestly. If it's a harder workload that I'm working on, I'll spend a couple of hours if it's not super hard I mean it could take like half an hour.

Sara: And how long do you think you want to do this or is this a stepping stone to something else?

Denise: I've known people who've been doing this for a while. There are musicians who are working with Howl currently who've been there like 22 years. Yeah, they're in their fifties now and they have families and they're really, they are able to be settled down. And then I know people who like have it as a side job, a stable side job, and they're working on their own music. I'm not really sure yet. I mean, I didn't really consider music as like a real career path that I was going to be taking until like two, three years ago. I still do have a lot to learn within the music industry, but hopefully I'd like to have my own music.

Denise: I try to work on my own music. You know this, like I said this, this job actually, it's a really great job and it changes all the time. So it, it's kept it interesting and I mean there's other routes to go with it. I mean like a lot of dueling piano players have also like branched out and run their own dueling piano businesses, their own companies. So I don't know, maybe in the long term future, that's another option to look at. There's a lot of ways to go from here, but yeah, I'd ideally like to do something that also uses my business degree and have my own business running something with music, so.

Matt: Yeah. You've done such an interesting job combining how you spent your time inside and outside of the classroom while you are at Fordham. Any particular professors or individuals you met at Fordham helped influence what you're doing now?

Denise: I mean, Rob Minotti was great. I like Rob Minotti. He's a great choir director. I mean I enjoyed doing choir for all four years. I mean he's the most standout person I think to me that I could remember from my time at Fordham. Besides that, no, but I mean I had a bunch of teachers throughout my time there. I think my very first accounting teacher actually was pretty, pretty great and it was actually one of the reasons why I ended up staying when we were able to like just have a try at each of like the majors that were in the business school. So you have like an accounting class, you had a marketing class, you had a management class, finance class, and then whoever was my teacher, I cannot remember his name, but whoever's my teacher in the accounting class was really great, super helpful, super clear. And I was like, I can understand all this. This is making a lot of sense. And I felt really good at it. So it made me want to continue and try to keep trying it. And I was like, okay, I can do this.

Sara: So some students are going to be listening and they're making career decisions and major decisions. What's some advice you would give them about following their passion or about merging their passions?

Denise: You're going to obviously put a lot of work into what you like doing. So if there is something you really enjoy doing, you're going to be better at that and you're going to have an easier time trying to find stuff doing that. So I don't know, just put yourself into your cover letters and--your resume is you, just put you in it and be smart about it obviously, but just...you don't want to go three, you don't want to be three years in an accounting job and then just be like, that's not what I want to do anymore. You know? So I don't know.

Sara: And also, I think pertinent to you, accounting is one of those industries that could also find itself in a creative world. So there's accountants at movie companies, there's

accountants at nonprofits, there's accountants everywhere so there's a way to find that business job within an environment that you're passionate about. That's a nice way to do it.

Denise: Of course. Yeah. If you, if you like music, but maybe like you're, you're not the best musician or you don't think you want to be putting your time doing that, but you really like accounting and you're good at that and you know, you want to keep pursuing that, that's definitely a good route to go. I mean there's music companies who need accountants. The same would go with any industry, and I think like the business world-- it's a lot easier to do a lot more like merging like that too. They are always going to be hiring people in those fields and other companies. So if you find something that you like, make it work, you know.

Sara: Well thank you so much for your time. This is wonderful. It's so nice to hear your story.

Matt: So great to have you, Denise.

Denise: This was a lot of fun.

Matt: Well that's another edition of Fordham footsteps. Fordham footsteps is actually brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Sara: You can find us on our website forever.fordham.edu/footsteps and wherever else you find your podcasts.