

Fordham Footsteps: Joan Garry, FCRH '79

Interview Transcript

Sara:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their paths from their time as a student to their current career.

Matt:

Some will have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe why they took some unexpected turns.

Sara:

Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives.

Matt:

And I'm Matt Burns, Associate Director for Young Alumni and Student Engagement. And with us today, we are thrilled to have Joan Garry, Fordham College at Rose Hill class of 1979. Thanks for being here, Joan.

Joan:

My pleasure, this obviously is an exception to the young alumni thing.

Sara:

It looks like you were a communication and philosophy major. How did you land on those?

Joan:

So, I went to Fordham with the expressed intention of being a communications major. And one of the things that I liked about Fordham was that it was a liberal arts school that had a variety of general liberal arts requirements, so that I had to take classes that I would probably not otherwise have taken, including a philosophy class. And I selected one based on a professor I'd heard really good things about. His name was Fr. Jim Loughran who went on to become the dean of Fordham College after I left. And he introduced me to philosophy and a real love of philosophy.

Joan:

He, along with Fr. Donnie Matthews, who was my mentor in the communications department, were buddies. And they helped cook up some intersection of those two things in a way that was really, really interesting to me. So for example, I had a communications internship where I worked for an organization that advocated for fair and appropriate media for kids. And I was charged with looking at how broadcast networks fulfilled their obligation for children's programming. And it was horrifying because they picked every lousy TV show for kids and figured out some way to show it as educational.

And I thought it was terribly unfair and completely unethical. And so, Donnie Matthews and Jim Loughran and I would talk about this notion of this intersection between communications and ethics.

Sara:

And what did you think you wanted to do with that degree?

Joan:

I had no idea. Instead, I did have no idea at the time it was all unfolding, and then I became very engaged in residence hall life and student affairs in general, when I was on campus. Back in the days when there was a severe shortage of dorms, I was selected by the dean of student affairs to participate in a task force to go to other colleges, to look at how they had renovated old buildings and made dorms out of them. So I had a reputation of being very engaged with student affairs, and so many people encouraged me to follow that path. And so I left Fordham and got a fellowship to pursue college student personnel at Michigan State University with the expressed intent of becoming a dean of student affairs. But I didn't do that.

Matt:

What happened instead?

Joan:

Yeah. No, I totally didn't do that. I decided that after about nine months, that if I wanted to be on a college campus, that I should go do something else first and then come back. So I went back to New York and through Fordham networking connections, I got a job at a place called Warner Communications in a particular division that became MTV. And I started at MTV Networks three or four months before MTV launch. So I was part of the management team that launched MTV, also courtesy of Fordham connections and nothing to do with ethics or philosophy at that time.

Sara:

But it was communications, at least you-

Joan:

Indeed, it was.

Sara:

Yeah.

Joan:

Indeed. It was. So, I spent-

Matt:

And communications for a younger crowd.

Joan:

I was part of a younger crowd at that time, Matt.

Matt:

You still are, Joan. I don't know what you're talking about.

Joan:

Thanks a lot, Matt. Yeah. So I spent eight years at MTV and then I spent eight years at Showtime. So, I was living the communications undergrad life for basically like 14 years, the philosophy part of it, the ethics part of it wasn't really showing up yet. And in fact, the work that I did at Showtime was I helped them get their pay-per-view business off the ground. And the primary source of revenue in that line of business was the joint venture between Showtime and Don King Productions. So I was in the boxing business at Showtime and thinking that perhaps there was something, I don't know, more meaningful that I could do?

Matt:

Do you want to learn to box or anything?

Joan:

No, I had no interest. So I decided actually, Matt to do a different kind of boxing. And right around that time, my wife and I had decided we wanted to have a family and I was not legally connected to the kids that my wife birthed. And so we filed a case in the State of New Jersey and I became the first woman in the state of New Jersey to legally adopt my partner's biological kids. And it was a huge 'Aha!' moment for me, recognizing, cheesy though, it may sound that one person can really make a difference. And it was huge news, like it was in the New York Times and in the Newark Star-Ledger.

Joan:

And I realized that the story of our family was educating people about members of the LGBT community in a very different kind of way. That in 1980, whatever it was, the early 1990s, gay families were not common at all. And I realized that the media had this incredible power and responsibility to tell these stories and really shape how the LGBT community was perceived and understood. And so, that led me to apply for a job I had no qualifications for, to run a nonprofit organization called GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and its mission was really about holding the media accountable to tell the fair and accurate stories of LGBT lives as a way of changing hearts and minds about the LGBT community to end homophobia.

Sara:

What do you think the hiring managers saw in you that made them see you as a viable candidate for this job?

Joan:

That's a really good question. So I had no fundraising experience. I had never worked in a nonprofit before. What I think that they saw... Let's go back to Fordham and communications for a moment. They saw me as a first rate communicator. They saw me as someone who was deeply passionate about the

mission of this organization, someone who had come from the media business, so understood it. And somebody who had real skin in the game, right? My partner and I had three kids and I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility that if you're going to bring kids into the world, you damn well better do something to leave it a better place than you found it for them.

Joan:

And this was my way to be able to do that. And the "Aha!" kicker for me was, oh my gosh, this is the alignment between communications and philosophy. This is what looking at communications and ethics and does the media have a responsibility to illustrate the diversity of our society and it's words and images, you bet it does. And if I could have something to do with that, well, that was just like going to be a really good day at the office metaphorically speaking.

Matt:

Joan, can you tell us a bit about what GLAAD was like in the beginning? It's a large organization now, but I know it was a bit different when you got involved.

Joan:

Sara asked a question about why did they hire me? And I believe that one of the reasons they hired me is that I had a reputation of being a very good manager. I managed people, well, I managed money well, I was good with budgets and finance. That ended up becoming the super power that was necessary because the organization was in financial disarray when I arrived. I think there was about \$360 in the bank. There were 18 staff members, they were expecting payroll and nothing will make you a good fundraiser faster than knowing that 18 people are expecting to be paid. I was a very passionate person about the mission and it made me a very bold, successful fundraiser.

Sara:

What are the some of the things that you're most proud of in your time at GLAAD?

Joan:

I would say that transforming it and digging it out of a ditch felt really gratifying because I really believed in the power it had. And I suppose when I think about accomplishments at GLAAD, one of the things we spent a lot of time doing was we tackled... Around the time of the fight for marriage equality there became a question of like, what is GLAAD's role in that? Right? We didn't have lawyers and we didn't have legislators, but we had a lot of access to the media. And so, we decided that we would begin to lobby the New York Times to include same-sex couples on their wedding pages. And so we began a campaign and really did our homework to make a presentation to the most senior people at the New York Times and made the argument that Tom and Joe should be side by side with Mary and Bob and made that case successfully.

Joan:

And I remember our kids were little at the time, but old enough to read and they would come down on Sunday mornings because they knew that's when the wedding section of the times came out and they

would want to know if, "Hey Jo-Jo, did you get another one this week?" And we used it as a platform to mobilize people around the country to get same-sex wedding announcements published in their local papers.

Joan:

And I think we had over 500 papers around the country that were publishing them as a result of the work that we had done with the New York Times. And I do believe that that's... It's pivotal in so many ways because I really believe that people do not accept what they don't understand and they don't understand what they don't see. And so when you see a gay couple on the pages of the New York Times wedding announcements, right? It leads to a greater sense of understanding, which then leads to acceptance. And I think when you also tie that in to these very human values of love and commitment that you strike the chord with people that makes it all make sense.

Matt:

Yeah. It certainly strikes a chord with what the Fordham community is supposed to be about when we talk about women and men for others and then some.

Joan:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Sara:

And when did you feel like your work was done and it was time to move on to something else?

Joan:

So, I left GLAAD after about 10 years, and I believe that people spend more time thinking about when they should take a new job and not enough time thinking about when the right time is to go. And it just felt like I had taken the organization to a certain point that I did not want the organization to become overly dependent on my leadership. And at the same time, our three kids were then in junior high and high school and the bigger your kids get, the bigger their problems get. And so, I made a decision or my family made a decision that I would go home and do my level best to chaperone our three kids through junior high and high school. And would this be the moment that I would say that I think it was a tougher job than advocating for the gays? And so I spent about six or seven years doing some part-time consulting and also just being at home with our kids to make sure they didn't come home to an empty house after school.

Sara:

Consulting in the nonprofit space?

Joan:

Yeah. And so that's actually... I started as an accidental consultant, if you will. Mostly to maintain my sanity while managing three teenagers, and then it became a thing. Then I realized that between my for profit experience and my nonprofit experience, that I had this a little bit of a special sauce about what I could offer to nonprofits. I took some time to do some political fundraising and I was the head of LGBT finance for Obama's first presidential run. So I learned about that. I got a teaching gig, went back to a

college campus. I got a teaching gig at the University of Pennsylvania where I taught media advocacy and social change.

Joan:

But then I became a pretty successful CEO coach for nonprofits. Started a blog, which became very successful, a podcast. And I wasn't really planning on this either. I became the Dear Abby of the nonprofit space and between my consulting work, the free content that I offer, and I now have a membership site with thousands of board and staff leaders from small nonprofits from North America and around the world called the Nonprofit Leadership Lab. And it's an online membership site that provides access to support and resources for nonprofit leaders to make them more successful at leading and managing for organizations that would not be able to afford coaches or consultants.

Matt:

Joan, thinking a bit about the lab.

Joan:

Yeah.

Matt:

At what point did you realize this can actually become a business? Because you had really just collected so many skills from your career and building community right, is really what we talk about with fundraising. You build community before you can make any kind of ask. So at what point did you realize that was a business and not just a great community you were building?

Joan:

I actually have this hypothesis that we leave college with a roller board. Right? And--those things that we used to put on planes when we flew in the before times--and that you add things to it. And that you should be constantly thinking about what's in the roller board and how do you make those things intersect? How do you create something where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts? And I do think about those things perhaps because I was a philosophy double major, I don't know. But it's a really interesting question that you're asking me, Matt, because I started my career at MTV. I'm doing new business, like startups stuff. I ended up advocating for a community of people and I learned that I'm actually really quite an effective advocate. And then I realized I'm a pretty successful nonprofit executive.

Joan:

And then I realized that there's this whole community that needs a champion and an advocate. And that community is a community of the... There are 1.5 million nonprofits in this country and two thirds of them have budgets under a \$1,000,000 and like two thirds of them with budgets under \$500,000. So there's this whole community of people that need somebody to advocate for them, that need a champion. Right?

Joan:

So I just went from advocating for one community to advocating for a different community. But in the sense of being able to have it be a startup business at the same time and like, how do we do it? And

what does it look like? And how do we look at the retention rates and all those sort of business components of it, along with the notion that I'm really helping helpers all around the world as a result. So it just is this remarkable series of intersections, but they're not, they're organic compilations of life experiences that leads you places if you're paying attention.

Sara:

And being intentional. Yeah, absolutely.

Joan:

Right. And if you're not asleep at the switch and if you're willing to see around the corners of what's over there, that isn't what you're staring at today.

Sara:

Well, nice thing too it sounds like you're empowering nonprofit leaders to advocate for themselves too.

Joan:

Yes. And that's as true for those nonprofit leaders as it was in the early 90s for those families who went and got second parent adoptions, because we filed that suit. I didn't know that we were empowering other people to secure those rights for themselves, but we were. And I think that's a huge thing for me. I think a Jesuit Education does offer this. It's this combination of spirituality with an intellectual-

Matt:

Curiosity?

Joan:

... curiosity. Good, good. Really. That's the right word that doesn't let you sit idly by. I just can't sit idly by.

Sara:

Well, Fr. McShane loves the phrase, "Bothered excellence."

Joan:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Sara:

He wants you to be bothered and then he wants you to go out and make change.

Joan:

Yes. And right, you have to see a gap. You have to be bothered by something that's broken, bothered by someone in need, bothered by someone who would benefit from your expertise, bothered enough to get off your butt and do something about it.

Matt:

Well, speaking of expertise, when you were coming up, were there any mentors, whether they were friends, family, Fordham professors, who helped you navigate your life decisions?

Joan:

Yes, absolutely. And I really would. I really would highlight Fr. Jim Loughran of blessed memory. He passed away a number of years ago. His last gig was as the President at St. Peter's College in Jersey City. And by the time I graduated, I believe he was the incoming dean at Fordham College. And he was the person who said, "You should take this class, or you would be stretched by this." He was the person who said, "You should take a class with Don Matthews because I think he shares your ethical view of communications." I think somebody like Fr. Ray Schroth, who I took a senior communications class with him. And my parents lived in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the first lunch counter sit-ins happened. And Ray Schroth and I talked about that and he said, "Are you going to Greensboro for summer vacation? Why don't you explore how the media covered the lunch counter sit-ins and maybe you can interview some people who are down there."

Joan:

And I still have the original typed copy of that senior thesis that I did. And it's all connected, I never even thought about it until not so long ago that, that was about civil rights. Right? That I was looking about how the media covered the story of these lunch counter sit-ins and what bias they brought to it. And I realized that I'd been wearing the ruby slippers the whole time, but it's true. And I do think that that's... I think the notion that the Jesuits were part of the campus experience, that they were accessible, that they were approachable, that they were intellectually curious. They cared about you. I think that it's a gift of Jesuit institutions that people... I don't know that people really fully understand.

Matt:

It sounds like it informs how you work with folks as well.

Joan:

Yeah. I think of Jesuits. It's funny, I'm an executive coach to the CEO at amfAR, The Legal Aid Society, The Union for Reform Judaism, and UNICEF. And I think of Jesuits as very coach-like, spiritual coaches who help you ask the right questions. And I'd never made that connection before today. So thank you for that.

Sara:

They planted some seeds and let you do the work.

Joan:

Exactly.

Sara:

Yeah. I really like that.

Matt:

Well, any advice you would offer, Joan, to current students, whether they're communication philosophy double majors, or students who want to get involved in the nonprofit sector, or who even want to take a more active role in LGBTQ+ advocacy.

Joan:

So I probably have more than one answer there. The first thing that I would say is a lot of people believe that you can't make a living working in a nonprofit and that is a myth. It's a myth. Just because nonprofits are not coming to campus to interview for prospective job candidates. The nonprofit space is in fact, an excellent way to cut your teeth in particular kinds of areas. So a smaller nonprofit might have a really small communication shop where you get to do everything. Where you get to exercise a lot of muscles. So, do not disregard the nonprofit sector just because it has the phrase nonprofit in it. So that's one piece of advice I would offer. The idea of being paid to do something that makes a difference? That's just dreamy. It's not something you have to wait until you have lots of money in the bank to say, "Now, I think I can make that switch."

Joan:

Do you know how many people I have met in my lifetime who have come up to me, who are in their 50's and they say, "I don't really like my job and I'd really like to move to do something more meaningful." And my thought balloon, and unfortunately thought balloons are not always visible to the naked eye, I always want to say, "You're 51. Meaningful work has been around you your whole lifelong. So, grab the baton." The second thing I would say is for LGBT alums, for those who are listening, advocate for yourself, own the power that comes with being an LGBT person. I was recently a speaker at an LGBT Lavender Graduation on the Fordham campus. It was the first time ever and Fr. McShane spoke so powerfully about LGBT equality. It was incredibly moving for somebody from the class of 1979.

Joan:

And one of the things that I spoke about was that LGBT people have something to teach our straight brothers and sisters, which is about the power of authenticity. To be able to live your life authentically and with vulnerability is a gift to those people around you. And so owning that, sharing that, being proud of that, and recognizing that you have something unique to share in the world that that's actually a superpower. I think a lot of people assume that if I was able to flip a switch, right, that you would want to flip a switch and be a straight person. They'd assume that I would want to flip that switch.

Joan:

And I would have no switch flipping for me. It has given me a perspective on the world that I would not trade for anything, not anything. Regardless of the trials and tribulations I may have experienced as a younger person. Those also are part of my roller board, too. All of that is part of my roller board, but my authenticity, my ability to advocate for myself, my ability to be vulnerable and talk about who I am to people who might disagree with me has made me certainly a more interesting person and certainly a stronger, more powerful person in the world. And I guess that's something that I would say to anybody who's listening, who is a member of the LGBT community, either currently on campus or an alum.

Matt:

Joan, that roller board is still rolling. Any, thoughts where it might be headed next?

Joan:

So, I wrote a book about nonprofit leadership and I believed I had a book in me. I just wasn't quite sure what that book was. And I think there might be another book in me, but I'm just not sure what it is yet. It probably has some connection to leadership and authenticity. I'm not sure, but The Leadership Lab is not getting smaller, Matt. We're on a path towards 10,000, 15,000 members. And what I like about it is that I can work remotely and coach and support leaders all around the world from the comfort of my beach house in Spring Lake, New Jersey or wherever I might be with my wife traveling as I... With a roller board full of shorts and bathing suits to go places.

Matt:

Great. Well, Joan, I think that's all we have for you. I want to thank you again for giving so much time to chat with us today. It's really wonderful to learn more about your journey.

Joan:

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate. I listened to some of the other stories when you asked me and each of them is... You all are lucky to have this gig because it's really interesting to hear how people's careers unfold.

Joan:

And I think that I would be totally remiss if I didn't say that I was and continue to be a proud member of the Mimes and Mummers. That it was my home away from home on the Fordham campus. I met friends who are, they're like family to me to this very day. When I hear people talk about sororities and fraternities, I have that same feeling about the Mimes. And I often joked that in 1979, it was about as close to a gay-straight alliance as institutions had in 1979. So, I just needed to shout out to any folks who are listening, who are Mimes alums, that I feel always privileged to be in your company.

Matt:

And we'll see you all back in Collins soon.

Joan:

And that would be good.

Matt:

Well, that's another addition to Fordham Footsteps.

Sara:

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Matt:

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