

Fordham Footsteps: Justin Henry, FCRH '14, Interview Transcript

Matt Burns:

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

Sara Hunt Munoz:

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

Matt Burns:

Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And I'm Sarah Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives. And with us today is Justin Henry, Fordham College at Rose Hill Class of '14. Welcome.

Justin Henry:

Thanks so much having me. I'm excited to be here.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

So your major was American studies and political science.

Justin Henry:

That is right. I got to Fordham knowing that I wanted to go to law school and I wasn't exactly sure how I was going to get there. I wasn't sure what I was going to study, if I was going to go through Gabelli or the liberal arts school, but I knew that I wanted to go to law school. Luckily, the American studies program meant that I didn't have to pick one thing. I had interest in literature, I had an interest in politics, I had an interest in philosophy. And American studies brought all of those interests together, which was a really great way for me to explore all those interests at once. And then the political science was just incidental. I had accrued enough credits for a minor, so I figured I might as well just do the major. But I honestly feel like I've used more of the political science education in my career, just because of the nature that my career has taken.

Matt Burns:

You didn't go to law school at least not yet. Tell us a bit about New York City Urban Fellows. And how did you decide on that first step after graduation?

Justin Henry:

Yeah, the big takeaway is that I set out to go to law school. I had basically carved out my Fordham career with law school as the path, and then I made a conscious decision not to go to law school, in part because of the New York City Urban Fellows Program. So I worked with the Fordham Office of Prestigious Fellowships to get this nine month fellowship through City Hall that allows you to get some hands on, real world experience working in city government. The woman that I worked with was fantastic and really helped to get my application up to snuff. I was a little nervous about the interview process going in so she even helped to conduct a mock interview with me. She put me in touch with some alumni of the program, which really helped to assuage a lot of the concerns and the fears I had going into the process, and then I got it.

Justin Henry:

So that was a really incredible opportunity for me to think about what a career might look like outside of the legal career that I had set out to pursue coming into Fordham and it was a big part of my decision again, not to go to law school.

Justin Henry:

I ended up being placed at the New York City Economic Development Corporation, which is an arm of City Hall that deals with job growth and economic development in the city. And I was working in government and community relations, and I found this interest in public affairs work that I didn't realize I had.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And when you were discerning whether to go to law school or not, did you lean on some of your professors or advisors and get advice from people at Fordham?

Justin Henry:

Yeah. I had a really great political science professor Dr. Hume. I took constitutional law with him and I went to him talking to him about my law school aspirations. Dr. Hume had a law degree and a PhD and told me flat out I do not use my law degree. So it was interesting to hear someone who had been to law school, who had gone through the process, someone who was really familiar talking about the law saying, I didn't need a law degree to do what I wanted to do.

Justin Henry:

I was a member of the pre-law society at Fordham. Through the alumni office, I was connected with a lot of Fordham law graduates or other alumni at Fordham who had pursued legal careers, so I felt like I had a good sense of what I'd be getting myself into. What I didn't have a good sense of is what my other options were and I think that is what I got through the Urban Fellows program and even through some of the internships that I had while I was at Fordham.

Matt Burns:

It's so interesting too because it feels like, and I know Dr. Hume has said something to this effect as well, you can have an interest in the law, want to study the law, even academically, but still not want to be an attorney. And that's still something you can follow and pull on a little bit as you try to figure out your career.

Justin Henry:

Absolutely. And that's where I landed is, instead of being a lawyer and practicing the law, I can interact with the law, I can talk about the law, I can even influence the law in some ways without being a practicing attorney. And that's where my career has taken me thus far.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Just jumping back to the internships. You've had some really interesting ones and I'm sure they helped guide your career path. Can you touch on those internships a little bit?

Justin Henry:

Yeah. So I interned with the Manhattan District Attorney's Office in two capacities. One was in the Crime Strategies Unit where we were doing some research into gang violence that was happening in Harlem. So that was a really interesting experience because it gave me the practical, this is what a legal investigation looks like, experience and got a lot of really valuable experience through there.

Justin Henry:

And then I had a second internship in the press office where I was reporting to the deputy communications director and working on all of the press and news and media frenzy that goes along with being in a really prominent prosecutor's office. So I was following trials, I was compiling news clippings from all of the incidents that were taking place all over the city, I was following media conversations, I was learning digital media and social media skills. And that was my first entry point into that public affairs work even before the New York City Urban Fellows Program.

Justin Henry:

Then after that, I had an internship at a public affairs lobbying firm that was working on a lot of really interesting issues that I hadn't been following because I was so dead set on a legal career. So thinking about economic development, which I'd never even really heard of until I got there, thinking about LGBTQ issues and the ways that those come up in the city, thinking about education, environmental protection, all of these issues that I wasn't really aware of. That was a really great way for me to get my feet wet in terms of larger policy discussions.

Matt Burns:

You had some internships at the DA's office. How did you end up working there?

Justin Henry:

I had done the New York City Urban Fellows Program. EDC had offered me a job in their community and government relations groups, so I worked there for a year afterwards, but I, again, was dead set on law school and thought that this was just a temporary thing until I could apply to law school. So this opportunity opened up in the Manhattan DA's Press Office. And I thought I could work here, work on my law school applications and then go to law school.

Justin Henry:

I got there. The job was a lot more demanding than I thought it would be so I didn't really have time to focus on law school applications. I was in and out of court. I was dealing with the DA himself and managing him at public events. I was following really high profile trials and found that I was getting good at it. I had also moved up in the office in a way that allowed me to have a little bit more visibility into the

issues, a little more influence over the issues, and I'd had a really great mentor who was actually a Fordham alum. Emily Tuttle is the Deputy Communications Director, and she took me under her wing and was teaching me the ways of political communications.

Justin Henry:

So with all of that, I decided, I'm getting great experience here, I'm learning a lot, and I'm still able to work with the law, and talk about the law, and deal with lawyers, and influence policy, but why don't I just stay put here? And so I ended up staying there for about four years until I was press secretary in 2019.

Matt Burns:

Tell us bit about what a press secretary does, in particular for the DA's office. For a lot of listeners, they hear press secretary, they think of C.J. Cregg on the West Wing, something like that effect, right? Tell us a bit about that day to day, what it was like, being a young person too, working with the DA at Manhattan.

Justin Henry:

Yeah, it was surreal being 26 or 27 in a role as press secretary to the Manhattan DA. And I will say, I felt in a way that I was wearing my dad's suit and I shouldn't be here. I felt like a kid in an adult's role, but a lot of what it is, is relationships, and that's honestly something that I learned at Fordham is how to build and nurture relationships with, at Fordham it was my classmates and my professors, in this role it was with of media, it was with partners, it was with other district attorney's offices and other stakeholders, community groups, other elected officials. And so just managing those relationships when something happens in court, knowing that someone is going to have questions and being able to answer their questions in a way that they're receptive to, that doesn't compromise the office obviously, but helps them to get what they need and gets you the visibility or the coverage that it is that the office is looking for.

Justin Henry:

That's the biggest part of it. There's the going in and out of court and dealing with really interesting cases, sometimes really heartbreaking cases, there's larger policy matters that would come up. So the DA, for instance, was all about data driven prosecution and was pushing that idea in New York and nationally, so helping him to think through how to push that message to a really broad audience.

Justin Henry:

There's dealing with press conferences and setting those up and briefing the press on the DA's stances on particular issues or the news of the day, speech writing. There's a little bit of everything that goes with the press secretary job. But I think that ultimately gave me the breadth of experience and communications that I'm using in my newer role now.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

It sounds like you probably leaned on a lot of things you learned at Fordham, writing, public speaking. Can you talk a little bit about some of the things that you learned getting your liberal arts education that you were able to use in your work?

Justin Henry:

Definitely the writing aspect. American studies, that program requires that you write an undergraduate thesis. So if I wasn't familiar or comfortable with writing before writing that thesis, I sure was afterwards. Doing the media research that's required in a press secretary role. I'd done a ton of research work at Fordham. I was an editor on the Undergraduate Research Journal. The public speaking, I did some public speaking in class, but I was in the Fordham Ramblers, which is the a capella group on campus, and that gave me comfort, not just speaking, but being on stage, being in front of a group of people, knowing how to conduct myself.

Justin Henry:

And then I think the most important aspect, and it's not something that I learned in the classroom, it's something that I learned through relationships at Fordham, through things that I heard Father McShane say was this commitment to public service. I've always thought of communications as a public service, the way that you're empowering communities, you're educating communities, you're letting people know what's happening in their neighborhood and their city. I think that I got that love for public service and that understanding for what it really meant at Fordham.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

So you were at the DA's office for three years. When did you realize it was time to move on?

Justin Henry:

It was toward the end, there were a lot of really high profile cases that were moving at the office, and after being in that role for a little while, you do get a little burnt out. But I was also curious about other policy areas, some of the ones that I was able to explore through that internship at the lobbying firm. And so I wanted to be able to talk about affordable housing and voting rights and environmental protection and other issues that were really important to me. And so I got an opportunity at a communications firm that allowed me to work with a lot of different clients, working on a lot of different issues.

Matt Burns:

Tell us about that. What kind of issues do you work with compared to your job as press secretary, what's your day to day like there? Anything you took from your previous experiences now in this new role?

Justin Henry:

So my firm works exclusively with public sector, nonprofit clients, which I found to be a big benefit because again, I do have this love for public service and public minded communications. So it meant that I wasn't going to be doing coms for some major corporation or big consumer brand or something. I was doing work that was really values driven. And that was really important to me.

Justin Henry:

As far as how it differed from my last role, I think the day to day was kind of the same. You're still dealing with reporters, you're still working on relationships, you're still doing a lot of writing. But I think what the main differences are the content. I got to learn a lot about areas that I didn't know much about. Voting rights, for example, is a whole section of legalese that I was completely unfamiliar with and through working with one of my clients right now, I'm gaining a whole new familiarity about the fight that's happening in Washington right now. And I'm working with a pretty large racial justice organization on criminal justice reform.

Justin Henry:

So while I was working at the district attorney's office, I was working in the law enforcement apparatus and now I'm working basically on the opposite side, learning about the ways that you can level the playing field and the justice system, ways that you can make reform work for everyone in the city, and the state, and the country. So that's been a really valuable experience. I'm working with foundations on arts programming. So just being able to get that breath of policy knowledge, I think has been really great.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

How's it been working during COVID? Challenging? Have you been remote?

Justin Henry:

Luckily public affairs and PR are industries where you don't need to be in an office. Obviously I would prefer to be in an office. My dog is barking on my calls half the day, but for a job like this, a lot of it is again, managing relationships. So I'm on email a lot. I'm on the phone a lot and I can do that from anywhere. So working during COVID hasn't been great. A lot of my client work has actually shifted to focusing around how we're responding to the pandemic and how we're doing it in a way that's equitable so that marginalized communities aren't particularly disadvantaged by what's happening during the pandemic. But as far as the day to day, how it's changed my work, it really hasn't. The work continues and a lot of these issues that I was talking about earlier are still happening, even in the midst of the pandemic.

Matt Burns:

What do you think is next for you?

Justin Henry:

That is a great question. I will say I do really enjoy the work at this communications agency, but I'm starting to miss public sector communications. I really miss being able to sink my teeth into a particular policy area or working with one official. I'm really interested in getting back into the policy debates and the policy discussions of the day, which are a lot of times shaped by public officials. And I think that eventually a return to government might be it in the cards for me, but who knows?

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Do you see yourself ever running for office?

Justin Henry:

No. No, I really prefer to be behind the scenes.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Okay.

Justin Henry:

I have a lot of respect for people who can go out in front of these issues and put themselves on the ballot. But I think that my value and the biggest contribution that I can give is my voice and helping a lot of these folks shape their voices and their narratives.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Is law school completely off the table or any other advanced degree?

Justin Henry:

It's about 95% off the table. Every now and then I go back to it and think, what if? A lot of my friends have gone to law school and graduated and have talked about their jobs, either positively or negatively. But I think that having carved out this area for myself in political communications and public affairs, I'm finding that I can have the same impact that I thought I would have as a lawyer in a way that I didn't think was possible.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And not be tied up for three years in classrooms.

Justin Henry:

Not be tied up and not saddled in law school debt. Absolutely.

Matt Burns:

Father McShane has said he wants graduates to go out in the world and be bothered. It's so interesting that your job is to professionally engage with a lot of the issues of the day. What do you think is the responsibility of any Fordham grad to stay engaged with the issues, the political issues of the day?

Justin Henry:

That's a really great question. I think it's really easy for folks to stay comfortable in their own bubbles. Even on Fordham's campus, it is a beautiful campus with a lot of resources and a lot of really great minds, but it's situated in the Bronx, which has so many challenges and has dealt with so many challenges for decades. Even now, when you think about the fires that happened just a couple of blocks away from Fordham's campus and all the people that lost their lives in that fire, you realize that you can't just exist in this insular bubble. And I appreciate Father McShane encouraging folks to get off campus to engage with the issues in the Bronx community or in other communities through programs like the Global Outreach Program and the campus ministry.

Justin Henry:

When I was at Fordham, I volunteered at a school on Southern Boulevard, just a couple of blocks from campus. And just seeing the issues that the students were dealing with, I think really opened my eyes to what's happening citywide and in communities across the country. And again, got me interested in this public interest work. So I think that to the extent that folks can look outside themselves and realize that this may not affect me directly, it may not affect my family directly, but there are a lot of people that are struggling and dealing with these issues. I think that is a really important perspective to gain in the Bronx, where arguably, there's no better place to be getting that. And certainly at Fordham, which is actively pushing students to seek out those kinds of experiences.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

What advice do you have for current American studies majors or students who want to pursue politics or political communication? What can you tell students to do, or not to do, to go on that journey?

Justin Henry:

A couple of things. The first is advice that I hated because I do not consider myself a networking pro, but I think that engaging with the network is so important in the political space and relationships. I've been saying it again and again, but they're so important in this work. I think what's great about Fordham is that a lot of the folks that you will meet through class, through activities that you're doing, your professors, staff have a lot of influence in these spaces. And so, being able to tap the folks that you meet just at the cafeteria on your way to class five, 10 years down the line, you really start to see the value in those relationships. And networking doesn't have to be something that you actively do, or you're going out to events all the time, it can be very natural and very casual. And I think that Fordham allowed me to do networking in a way that makes sense for me.

Justin Henry:

I would also say that folks should keep an open mind. Again, I went to Fordham fully intending to go to law school and eight years out of school now I do not want to go to law school. It's very easy to hitch yourself to a certain goal or to a certain outcome that you're expecting and then just work toward that. But when you're doing that, you miss out on all the opportunities and things that happen in the meantime. I don't know if I would've taken the New York City Urban Fellows Program for instance if I had just been focused on law school. Now years later, I'm seeing the fruits of that journey. So I would encourage folks to keep an open mind.

Justin Henry:

And then the last thing is you don't have to be working in communications, you don't have to be working in politics even to be engaged, but I do really encourage folks to read the news at the very least and look at what's happening in your community and communities across the country and around the world, because there are people that are really struggling. And I think that Fordham gives people a really great platform to do something about that struggle. Fordham gives you a great education. It gives you a great set of morals. You're engaged with some of the best minds on a lot of the top issues that are happening right now. And you should be using that as a resource to help other people, in addition to furthering your career and getting the jobs that you want and everything. There is always a reason to be looking outside of yourself to help those who need it.

Matt Burns:

And I got to ask, Justin, any singing in your life? I mean, the former Rambler do you get to stretch the pipes?

Justin Henry:

Unfortunately, no. The Ramblers before the pandemic used to do a reunion every other year and that was my one opportunity to get my singing in. But now with the pandemic happening, I'm not sure when I'm going to have another opportunity to do that. So we'll see.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Just some duets with your dog.

Justin Henry:

Exactly. Me and the dog are sitting here. We're going to form a doo-wop group.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

I love it. I love it. Well, thank you so much. This was so interesting. It was wonderful to hear from you. A lot of great tips for our young people out there who either are thinking about law school or thinking about politics. So thank you so much for all this great advice that you gave us.

Justin Henry:

Thank you both for the time. I really appreciate it.

Matt Burns:

That's another edition of Fordham Footsteps.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

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Matt Burns:

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