

# Fordham Footsteps: Sara Hunt Munoz, FCRH '99, GSE '10, '19

Matt:

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:

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

Matt:

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:

And I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, former Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives.

Matt:

And with us today is, well...

Sara:

Me, Sara Hunt Munoz. Fordham College at Rose Hill, class of '99, and the Graduate School of Education classes of '10 and '19.

Matt:

Triple Ram.

Sara:

Mm-hmm.

Matt:

Humble brag. Well, that's right. After 16 years serving the Fordham community, Sara has moved on from the Office of Alumni Relations. She's back with us today on the other side of the microphone to share her story as a Fordham grad.

Sara, it's so great to see you. Can you believe this is our first in-person interview since January 2020?

Sara:

No, that's so crazy. I can't believe it.

Matt:

This is so surreal for me, I have to admit. So folks, in this business, the alumni relations/development side here don't often take curtain calls. Our job is really to tell the story of other folks even though you and I are both alumni here. What's it like for you here coming back in Martino Hall for those playing along at home?

Sara:

I mean, it's been a solid three months since I've been gone, so it's mixed feelings. It feels like I've never left. I've run into people this afternoon and seen the office is still the same, but I know that I've moved on and I'm an alum now, so it's a little bit weird.

Matt:

Yeah. So you were an alum a couple years ago at this point.

Sara:

Mm-hmm.

Matt:

Tell us about your undergraduate major. What was it? How'd you pick it?

Sara:

So I was really involved in my high school newspaper and thought I wanted to go the journalism route. So when I was looking at colleges, I really was deciding between the Newhouse School in Syracuse or Fordham. And Syracuse afforded me a really niche communication experience, but I liked Fordham for its access to New York City and potential internships. And ultimately, even though I swore I would never go to a city school, I ended up in the Bronx at Fordham.

And I always knew communication was going to be my area. And back then, Fordham was great because it let you explore all the different topics that fell under communications. So I took TV and popular culture. I took magazine article writing, screenwriting, a bunch of things with Father Tueth that I really enjoyed. And so I got to see a smattering of opportunities within the communication umbrella. And while I still love journalism, I decided I really wanted to get into entertainment and more of the TV and film side of things.

Matt:

So you landed at New Line Cinema.

Sara:

Correct. So I had a couple of different internships at Fordham. I worked at CBS News and their promotions department. Didn't love it.

Matt:

What is that for folks that don't know?

Sara:

It's recording those promos that come on advertising when the news is coming on at 6:00.

Matt:

This episode of Fordham Footsteps brought to you by...

Sara:

Exactly. All of those sort of breaks where you're advertising your own channel's programming. I spent most of my time in kind of a closet going through video cassette tapes, finding woman carrying a purse on the street so they could put that in the news.

Matt:

Oh.

Sara:

Teaser. It was all of that footage that they needed just for the commercials. So I did a lot of that. And it was kind of boring, but it gave me insights into that part of the industry, which was good. As we talked about on this show, it's good to find out what you don't like. It's equally important as to finding out what you do like.

My next internship was at One Life to Live, the soap opera over here on the Upper West Side.

Matt:

Wow.

Sara:

So that was really fun. Got to read fan mail. Got to run lines with the actors while they were in hair and makeup. Got to get coffee for the writers and pop in and out of the writer's room. So that was where I really fell in love with that side of the house. But I wasn't a real go-getter. I was kind of a pacifist, just getting the coffee and smiling. And I probably could have pushed harder for more substantive jobs, but I was... It was my senior year, I was looking for a date to the senior ball and that was kind of my priority.

Matt:

You had conflicting priorities.

Sara:

I did.

Matt:

You were working hard at a lot of different things.

Sara:

I was. Well, it was funny. I mean, we were invited to be seat fillers for the Daytime Emmys, and I had to turn it down because it was the same evening as the senior ball. And then from the internship, I was asked to become a personal assistant to one of the actresses who had a side hustle and needed help with that. And I did it for a few weeks, but ultimately it didn't work out because I just had so many other things going on at the end of the year.

But I decided to stay in the Bronx that summer. I lived off-campus right across from Pugsley's, and I temped while I looked for a job in entertainment, communications, that world. And it sounds crazy, but I answered a help wanted ad online and got an interview at New Line Cinema, and that was sort of my entree into entertainment.

Matt:

So a literal shot in the dark there.

Sara:

Yes. Yeah, my mom was on monster.com or something-

Matt:

Throwback.

Sara:

Yeah, and was like, "Sara, Sara, you got to see this." And I applied and got a phone call and went in and got the job. So I started in August of 1999 as an administrative assistant to a vice president who worked in the administration department of New Line Cinema.

So it wasn't the glitz and glamour. It wasn't like the producers. It was human resources, like building operations and travel. But I still got to go to all the employee screenings. I got to meet some of the actors. So I was still kind of on the cusp of it, but in a more administrative role. And I was there for five years. And yeah, it was a lot of fun. I learned that you really had to hustle, and if you wanted to be on the creative side of things, you really had to be in Los Angeles. New York was more of the operations side, and if you wanted to be creative, you had to be in LA.

Matt:

Were there a lot of people there trying to make it to the creative side and that they tried to make this kind of their foot in the door?

Sara:

Yes, absolutely. And I mean, I thought that was my foot in the door too, but then I sort of got pigeonholed in this area. I was one of the admin team, not on the creative team, but people-

Matt:

You were good at it, weren't you?

Sara:

I was. I was. You know, calendars and phones and files, that was sort of my forte.

Matt:

Wait, so what would have been your creative outlet at that time if you could've broken in, if you had made the move to LA?

Sara:

I mean, I had this screenplay that I had written in college. I was still... I was adapting-

Matt:

Coming up next, folks.

Sara:

... I was adapting books. I was reading into screenplays-

Matt:

Really?

Sara:

... for fun. I was writing some random, lame poetry. I was still being creative, but because I didn't have a boss who was footsteps away, no pun intended, from-

Matt:

A little bit intended.

Sara:

... television or from Lord of the Rings, you know what I mean, I was sort of more of a backseat driver. And that was okay with me.

Matt:

Five years is a long time in the life of at least this current generation of young professionals.

Sara:

Mm-hmm.

Matt:

How did you know it was time to make a switch?

Sara:

Sure. So New Line got bought by Time Warner, and a lot of different AOL and everybody kind of converged into one big corporation. And under the Time Warner umbrella, we did a lot more corporate initiatives.

So I was New Line's point person for their volunteer opportunity program. So I would write grants. I would work with different employees who wanted to do fundraising things. And so I really got into the nonprofit of a for-profit side of things.

And I enjoyed it, and I kind of got a little frustrated with the capitalism of the movie industry. It was all about box office and dollars, and it just kind of turned me off after a while. And I said I'm going to take a significant pay cut and give up my dream and go work for nonprofit. And that's what I did. So I went to the Lymphoma Research Foundation, and I took all of that volunteer opportunity stuff with me and I managed their regional chapter program.

Matt:

No kidding.

Sara:

Yeah, and then I had done a little bit of event planning back at New Line. I had helped organize their summer party and their Christmas party and stuff like that. And I brought that kind of low-key event experience with me, and I would help them organize walks and galas and golf outings and sort of be the point person in the office, while all of these chapter leaders around the country were raising funds to combat lymphoma.

Matt:

Tell us a bit about how you made the switch to come to Fordham and the work you were doing here when you started out.

Sara:

Sure. So I was only at LRF for two years. It was a really small shop, and everybody was kind of stepping on each other. And there was a board that wasn't super active. And keep in mind, all of the volunteers were either afflicted with lymphoma or adjacent to lymphoma. So my chapter leaders started passing away, and that was really...

Matt:

Hard.

Sara:

... hard, and emotional. And our office overlooked the site of the World Trade Center when they were still cleaning up the site, and that was also hard. So it was a combination of things. I was ready to move on. I had had my taste of that world. And wouldn't you know it, there's a posting for a job at Fordham and I was called to come home. I didn't really know what it meant. It was to run the regional club program. I thought that meant that the Glee Club had different pockets of alumni across the country that I would be managing. But I applied for it. I got called in for several rounds of interviews.

And essentially the job was the first rung on the ladder running exactly what it is, the regional club program that we then branded the regional chapter program. It was different alumni who lived around the country and wanted to stay engaged and have events and be connected. And Father McShane had been here for a couple years already, so he had already done his inauguration tour. And when I came in, we just got him back on the road meeting the alumni and talking about why it's important to stay connected. And so I helped them plan the presidential events and-

Matt:

Golf outings, volunteer events, literally everything you'd just been doing.

Sara:

Yeah, exactly. A lot of the same stuff. So I took my toolkit that I had been building and I brought it to Fordham and I stayed for 16 years.

Matt:

So you were in regional for a while there when we first met, actually, when I was a student. It's an interesting part of your story to me. When you made that decision, you knew something was next for you and timing kind of worked out. You had that interesting title, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives.

Sara:

Right.

Matt:

What does that mean? What were you doing?

Sara:

Who knows? A little bit of everything, Matt. Honestly, when I was doing regional, it was very focused and I knew exactly what I was doing. Strategic initiatives sort of encompassed a whole lot of different things that just sort of fell to me because there was no other programming area that had made sense to give it to.

I worked on the alumni attitude survey. I worked in our directory projects. I was the point person for Forever Fordham, our online alumni community. And then I managed a handful of people within the office. I did a little bit of events. And then when we finally got the alumni association, the FUAA, up and running, that became one of my chief priorities, was to keep them engaged and working hard and-

Matt:

And growing, and...

Sara:

Exactly.

Matt:

You know, really you serve in kind of that multiplier effect. There's only so many of us in the office, but this board of 30 and the volunteers on top of that can do so much more.

Sara:

For sure.

Matt:

And you spent a lot of time providing leadership for that in ways I don't think a lot of people even realize. You got a couple more degrees while you were here at Fordham.

Sara:

I did, and I probably waited too long. It was something that when they offered me the position was always in the back of my head. Oh, I can get a master's. I can get a master's. But because my position was so much travel, it took me a while to navigate that and figure out how I could do the business travel and the schoolwork. And eventually I made it work, and I got a master's in educational leadership, administration, and policy.

Matt:

What made you pick that? Just the direct relatability to the job?

Sara:

Exactly. It just seemed like all good stuff to know that would enhance the work I was already doing. I worked in education. I wanted to be a better manager. I wanted to grow programming, and this seemed like a good backbone for that.

Matt:

Yeah. But you got a bit more. Nine years later, you ended up adding some more letters.

Sara:

I did.

Matt:

You got your doctorate.

Sara:

I did. I don't know why. I just said Fordham's offering me this opportunity. I wouldn't have to pay a lot of money for it. Why not do it? Why not become a doctor? How cool is that to say that I'm a doctor? There really wasn't much more to it than that. I had two kids, I was busy at work, but somehow I was like, let me do this one last thing that Fordham can give me.

Matt:

Well, it's such a good lesson. Some folks might have that in their plan from the time they graduate, but sometimes you really just need to say yes to the types of opportunities that are presented there.

Sara:

Sure.

Matt:

What a good example of saying, hey, these are resources. I might not know what my next step is, but, wow, I can pursue professional development here.

Sara:

Mm-hmm.

Matt:

Tell us a bit about what you studied, because I think it is actually really interesting and probably not something you were thinking about as a topic when you were a student.

Sara:

Oh, of course. So again, I went the route of educational leadership, administration, and policy because I had already gotten the master's in it. But we obviously had to write a dissertation, and they said, "Make



it something that you're not going to get bored with, and make it something that the information is what you have access to."

And so I ended up doing it on leveraging loyalty to motivate faculty and staff giving, because I was working at an institution where we were trying to raise money and we left a lot of money on the table when it came to faculty and staff.

And I had done a professional development webinar where Texas Christian University was an exemplar of faculty and staff giving. And I said, wow, that's my case study. So I ended up going down to Texas and meeting with dozens of different administrators, people who worked in athletics, people who worked in the chancellor's office, and just finding out why they had been so successful and what were some key takeaways that other people could learn from. And I wrote a 100-plus page dissertation on how best to leverage the loyalty that staff have and get them to give back.

I got my doctorate, and then I was kind of hoping to use that as a stepping stone into another career opportunity. And I didn't know what that was going to be. I didn't know what doors would open because of it. So I just sat patiently knowing that I could pull it out whenever I needed to.

And the pandemic hit, and my team and the alumni relations team did an amazing job pivoting and continuing to do great work, but it also gave me a chance to evaluate. I have three degrees from Fordham, a reputable institution, something to be really proud of, and am I using all of that? And so I decided that it was time to start something new.

Matt:

And what is that?

Sara:

So now I am the Director of Alumni Relations at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, which is an independent, progressive, pre-K through 12 school that has a campus here in New York City and one in the Bronx, very similar to Fordham.

So it's a younger constituency, but it's a lot of the same things I was doing at Fordham, event planning, fundraising, building relationships. There's two of us on our team, so I'm kind of... have my arms around a lot of different things, things where at Fordham, we had different people in charge of reunion and homecoming and young alumni and cultural, and I'm doing all of that.

Matt:

Never mind separate annual giving teams, for those who know the shop talk, or even the larger separate marketing teams and all these different divisions that really go on behind the scenes to make Fordham run. And you're doing so much of it now yourself. Can you talk about anything you learned while working at Fordham that you're bringing to your current work?

Sara:

Absolutely. The way to engage people is just to introduce yourself, say hello. The way to fundraise is to introduce yourself and say hello. So being the new gal on the team was a really great way for me to open those doors and start conversations with people who haven't been engaged for many years. So I've been given a portfolio of donors and potential donors that I've been reaching out to, which is something I really didn't have at Fordham but is a nice growth opportunity for me.

But I'm taking a lot of the things that were successful here and bringing them over to Fieldston. We didn't have any cultural programming, so we've started to sort of emulate some of the things you're

doing here that were really successful. I'm going through my first cycle of reunion, so I'm going to see it first and then see how we can tweak it and enhance it.

But just remember, it's 147 seniors graduating this year, so the scale is very different, but there's so much more we could be doing than just the three tentpole events a year. There's a lot of fun, smaller, intimate events that we could sprinkle in like we do at Fordham that I'm looking forward to bringing over there.

Matt:

It's so fascinating how things have come so full circle for you and how you've really done a good job of collecting those skills and experiences along the way. Sara, you might remember when we interviewed Joan Garry on the podcast, she talked about collecting skills and experiences along the way, and I think you've done just such an interesting job of doing that. I know you're only getting your feet wet there at Fieldston, but any idea what's next?

Sara:

Oh, gosh. I mean, one of their issues with engagement has been a lack of continuity. They've gone through several directors of alumni relations over the past few years. So I think for me to make any progress, I need to commit to it and I need to tell these alums that they're going to see me next year at reunion and the following year at reunion.

So what's next is for me to build a really robust calendar of engagement opportunities and meet as many people as I can and sort of become the face of their alumni office to build these relationships that I talked about and to build some continuity. So I don't plan on going anywhere just yet. I think I have a lot of work to do.

But it's nice. I have one direct report. People are always clamoring for management experience and they think they're missing that on their resumes, and I got a lot of that at Fordham.

But what I'd like to tell young people is that management doesn't have to be in the office space. If you're a club leader or a member of a team or a captain, there's a lot of management experience that you're already getting, and it's really just how you frame it when you put it on your resume and meet with potential employers.

Before I had a team to manage, I was managing 30-plus volunteers across the country doing regional. So I feel like management is a loose term, and a lot of people are doing it and not even realizing it.

Matt:

Yeah, and it tells you too, if you want that experience, you can create it for yourself.

Sara:

Sure.

Matt:

I mean, and for anyone listening who wants to work in higher ed or already is, take note of that sort of thing. There could be opportunities to engage volunteers in new ways and add that line to your resume.

Sara:

I mean, additionally, we always talk about networking and how important it is. My young alumni at Fieldston are now college kids. I'm telling them, "Start building your networks now." They don't really get it, but they will. I mean, I feel like I was on LinkedIn and I was giving business cards out at events, but I wasn't building relationships with my professors like I probably should have been, because when I needed a recommendation for graduate school, nobody remembered me.

So it's important to take those things seriously. Make yourself memorable. Connect with people on LinkedIn after you meet them. You're at an event, you had a good chat, send somebody an email whose business card you got to say, "It was great to meet you, hope to see you soon."

And I think that people rely on their networks when they need them, but it's important that you nurture your networks. And LinkedIn makes it so easy. Like somebody's post or share an article that you think somebody would like, and just do all that in the off-season just to maintain those relationships. And then when you really do need somebody, it doesn't come from out of the blue.

Matt:

One question I've always wanted to ask you-

Sara:

Oh.

Matt:

... thinking about your original ideas around journalism or storytelling, media in general, starting this podcast-

Sara:

Yeah.

Matt:

... did that fulfill that a little bit for you?

Sara:

Yeah, absolutely. I loved this podcast. This was one of the highlights of my time here. We were a little bit late in the podcast world, but I think it's still growing and people are adding new shows all the time. It was a great way to meet alums and really take a deeper dive into their histories.

So yeah, this was really a creative outlet for me. It's nice to combine passions. I was working in the entertainment field even though I wasn't on the front lines of it, but I was still in that world. And then I went to Fordham to work, and I love Fordham. I spent some of my best years at Fordham, so I got to have that as the backdrop for the work I was doing.

So I think it's important that people... Maybe you want to be in music, but you know you're never going to be a singer. So become the accountant for a music company. You know what I mean? There's ways that you can converge your passions and fulfill both of them.

Matt:

Absolutely. So folks might not appreciate this, but Fordham is actually the number-two employer of all Fordham graduates.

Sara:

Okay. I believe it.

Matt:

Any advice you might share to students or recent graduates or anyone who's considering to come back and work at Fordham?

Sara:

Oh, it's a great place to work. I stayed for 16 years. It really is a family, and it's becoming less and less siloed the more we move forward. There used to be that different departments didn't speak to another, but there's so much more overlap now and collaboration that just makes the job easier. It's a very warm community to be a part of, especially in development.

Roger Milici has done a fantastic job of bringing in guest speakers and having retreats and really, really building a family. So I think if that's what you're looking for, definitely work for Fordham. You know, you can also pursue an education if you wanted to. You might take a summer Friday or two, but I think it's a great place to work, and obviously the proof is in the pudding because I stayed here for many years.

Matt:

Yeah, and really to work on something mission-driven. I think that's been another thread in a bit of your career as well.

Sara:

Sure.

Matt:

And insofar as we're on the front lines, we are with alumni, but we're definitely not there in the classroom, but certainly it means quite a bit to be supporting that ongoing development of the student body here at Fordham.

Sara:

Absolutely, and when I was looking to transition out of Fordham, Fieldston really caught my eye because it seemed like a microcosm of Fordham. It was started back in the 1800s by a man who wanted to educate people of modest means. It's the same John Hughes story. He built a school in New York City for people who couldn't afford education. And it's mission-driven. It's progressive. It really is oriented around social justice and giving young people agency, and it really emulates the same philosophies that I saw here at Fordham, which was why it was such a natural fit for me.

Matt:

Sara, that's about all I have here. And I can ask you questions all day, but you've done so much for the Fordham community over the past 16 years, and I know even as an alum, you'll continue to be such an important member of the community. Is there anything else you'd like to share on behalf of your experience and all your time, now that this is our final send-off here at the microphone?

Sara:

Yeah, I mean, we mentioned it earlier. Keep collecting things for your toolbox. Be a forever learner. Always take value in the experience that you're living and file things away... You never know. I didn't know when I was running that volunteer program that I would go that route and be immersed in the world of volunteerism. So really, don't take anything for granted. Take all of those skills that you're learning at your internships or your first jobs or even your fourth jobs, and put them in your toolbox.

And give back to your alma mater. Fordham has given us all so much, whether it's life experiences, friendships, education. There's so many reasons to give back, and it doesn't have to be thousands or millions of dollars. Participation is important at any level, because it shows to other people that Fordham is worth giving back to.

Whether it's prospective families looking at Fordham for the first time, whether it's US News and World Report, when an alum gives back, it means something and it means that you are still connected and that you care and that you're sort of putting your money where your mouth is.

Matt:

Well, Sara, I want to thank you personally for all the years of mentorship and of course for being a collaborator and partner in crime here for this podcast. If we can sign off together one more time?

Sara:

Okay.

Matt:

Well, folks, that's another addition to Fordham Footsteps.

Sara:

Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Matt:

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