THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

Leading the charge, alumnae experts in diversity and inclusion strive for a better future for all.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TRANSPARENCY WHEN CRISSES ARISE. P. 5

STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON SILVER LININGS IN A YEAR OF UNCERTAINTIES. P. 16

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Marquette University

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DEAR DIEDERICH COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION ALUMNI AND FRIENDS:

While listening to a podcast* recently, I learned of a genre of filmmaking called slow television. Slow television started with a televised documentary of a seven-hour train journey through Norway. Rather than an edited, shorter story that is high on plot and character development, slow television encourages us to pause or slow our pace. The podcast hosts’ commentary as they watched the train’s journey revealed that whether it is the scenery that blend as the engine passes an industrial complex or the opening of space as the train moves into the countryside, stories are discovered when we slow down and take in our surroundings.

This idea of slow television and the stories that exist but may be missed seems particularly salient as I share this issue of Comm magazine with you. This issue comes as we continue to emerge from a global pandemic that has forced us to pause and consider the aspects of our lives that have always been there. During the pandemic, we were challenged to turn our attention to what mattered most to us as a college of communication at a Catholic, Jesuit university. As we paused, we renewed our commitment to create a more just and inclusive world. In this issue, you will read about Diederich alumnae who within their organizations turn their lenses toward what it takes to make impactful change that results in equity. You also will read about our students and how they adapted to the changing world, allowing themselves to see what mattered most in their journeys so that they could continue to hone their storytelling crafts — in the arts, in journalism and in marketing. I invite you, too, to join us in this spirit of slowing down, with our “Ignatian Moment” below, a new feature that encourages all of us to pause for an Ignatian-inspired reflection on our own unique stories.

For me, slow television is a reminder to slow down and see what is beautiful and meaningful in each small moment. These are lessons we will continue to embrace in the Diederich College. Ignatian spirituality encourages us to make meaning out of our experiences and find ways to share these meanings within our homes, our organizations, our neighborhoods and our shared world. Even as we shifted gears through this pandemic, there were stories to be told. And as this past year has made clear, our world needs skilled communicators who can draw our attention to the world that surrounds us and help us create meaning.

All my best,

Dr. Sarah Bonewits Feldner
Dean
Diederich College of Communication

* “The Great Narrative Escape,” Invisibilia podcast, NPR

COMM      Diederich College of Communication      2021      No. 09

IGNATIAN MOMENT

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Dr. Sarah B. Feldner

EDITORIAL TEAM
Sarah Koziol, Arts ’92 (editor), Stephen Filmanowicz, Cailin Hostad, Jennifer Russell, Karen Samelson and Stacy Tuchel

DESIGN TEAM
Sharon Grace, Chelsea Mamerow

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The Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service earns important funding to strengthen its mission of community reporting.

On a typical day, the home page of the Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service features a wide range of content that impacts its readers: a story about advocates working to lessen the racial and ethnic disparities in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign; a guide to avoiding stimulus check scams; an article about a literacy group that reaches out to incarcerated individuals; and a profile of a non-profit organization that helps those in underserved neighborhoods of Milwaukee’s central city.

"It will help us stay in touch with our readers and provide them with the information they need," said Editor Ron Smith. "It will also allow us to expand our coverage into new areas."
Voices Carry

Essay compilation shares the achievements and challenges of Marquette’s Black alumni.

Black Marquette—In Their Own Words: Overcoming Obstacles and Achieving Success is a collection of more than 60 essays written by Black Marquette alumni regarding their unique university experiences that span nearly a century of Marquette’s history. Editor Valerie Wilson Reed, Sp ’79, calls the book a “labor of love” and says it’s a compilation that celebrates Marquette pride.

“Our parents were very involved in the launch of the O’Brien Fellowship, and it was one of the greatest joys of their lives,” says Kathy Frechette Tenhula, president of the Frechette Family Foundation. “Over the past four years, we’ve been fortunate to meet with fellows and listen to student interns and witness the powerful impact of the program. It is both exciting and inspirational to carry our parents’ legacy forward.”

Matched with student interns, each O’Brien Fellow spends nine months researching, reporting and writing stories with the potential to change policies and improve lives, according to Dave Umhöfer, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and former O’Brien Fellow who is now director of the program.

“With this generous support, the college can grow the O’Brien Fellowship and provide more of our students the unique opportunity to work alongside an even broader group of professional journalists as they report on the stories that make a difference,” says Dean Sarah Feldner.

“Space is Hard” shares updated best practices on handling crises within high reliability organizations, or HROs, such as passenger airlines, nuclear power plants and space flight manufacturing operations. Waters and D’Urso expand on the principles of situational crisis communication theory—a guiding framework for crisis communication—by extending the theory’s application to social media.

Their research contains a valuable and surprising lesson for HRO communication professionals, Waters says: “Reputation is not as important in this case as showing integrity.”

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During a crisis, HROs should prioritize technical transparency by sharing updates on investigations, Waters says. This approach helps organizations “preserve the public trust through openness and a candid, unfiltered description of how the organization is managing the crisis,” Waters says. “Honesty is always the best policy.”

For academics, the research brings situational crisis communication theory into the modern era by offering guidelines on social media as a crisis communication tool.

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“Being able to offer a substantial extension to this theory is the jewel for our colleagues,” Waters says. — Lauren Sieben

Since its inception, the distinguished O’Brien Fellowship in Public Service Journalism has provided 30 professional journalists the opportunity to tell important community-affecting stories, covering such timely issues as the struggle for equality for Black Americans, the ripple effect of Milwaukee’s backlog of unsolved homicide cases, and the damage to the Great Lakes caused by invasive species.

With a recent $5 million gift from the Frechette Family Foundation, the program received a critical boost to continue its delivery of impactful journalism and student journalist internships. The new commitment builds on an $8.3 million gift that Peter and Patricia Frechette made to the Diederich College in 2013, which launched the O’Brien Fellowship program, named for Patricia’s parents, Marquette alumni couple Perry, Jour ’36, and Alicia, Arts ’35, O’Brien.

“We are so grateful for the continued generosity of the Frechette Family Foundation,” says Dean Sarah Feldner. “Their parents were very involved in the launch of the O’Brien Fellowship, and it was one of the greatest joys of their lives,” says Kathy Frechette Tenhula, president of the Frechette Family Foundation. “Over the past four years, we’ve been fortunate to meet with fellows and listen to student interns and witness the powerful impact of the program. It is both exciting and inspirational to carry our parents’ legacy forward.”

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In the social media age, professors uncover the need for organizations to be transparent when crises arise.

In 2016, a video posted to YouTube showed a routine test of a SpaceX rocket at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. A few seconds into the clip, smoke begins snaking out from the side of the rocket. A minute passes, then boom: An explosion erupts and a mushroom of flames erupts from the structure. Fire engulfs the rocket and the launchpad below.

The stunning footage ran on news broadcasts around the world, and the public immediately started asking: What went wrong?

SpaceX and its CEO Elon Musk quickly took to Twitter to share frequent updates on the investigation into the fire. The company’s use of social media during the crisis was unorthodox in the aerospace industry, and Dr. Eric Waters, assistant professor of communication studies, and Dr. Scott D’Urso, chair and associate professor of communication studies, took notice.

“They made a variety of statements and updates through social media that Scott and I noticed were different,” Waters says. “They were unusual.” By engaging with the public on Twitter, SpaceX was uniquely open and transparent about the explosion.

“People would actually tweet at SpaceX or Elon Musk, and they would get responses,” Waters says. “They were really being open and unfiltered: they weren’t trying to hide things behind the veil.”

The SpaceX response inspired Waters and D’Urso to write the paper “Space is Hard: A Case Study on Using Social Media for Selective Investigative Disclosure as a Crisis Communication Strategy to Achieve Technical Transparency,” which earned top paper from the Association for Business Communication panel at the National Communication Association’s annual convention. The paper was recently published in an edition of the International Journal of Business Communication.

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“Being able to offer a substantial extension to this theory is the jewel for our colleagues,” Waters says. — Lauren Sieben
Safety First

New Diederich College-developed curriculum prepares journalists for increasing dangers in reporting.

In fall 2019, in partnership with the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation, the college launched the James W. Foley Journalism Safety Modules, a series of resources intended to help undergraduate journalists assess, prepare for and react appropriately to dangerous situations they may face on the job. The 14 modules address aspects of physical safety, such as interviewing hostile sources and covering foreign conflict, as well as emotional and mental well-being.

“We want our student journalists to be proactive in thinking about their own safety and the safety of those they’re working with and to be empowered to act, should they need to,” says Dr. Ana Garner, chair and professor of journalism and media studies.

Each module consists of suggested reading and discussion questions on a different safety topic. Instructors can choose which module fits best with their course and incorporate it into existing course work for one or more class periods, as well as invite experts to speak on a different safety topic. Instructors can choose which module fits best with their course and incorporate it into existing course work for one or more class periods, as well as invite experts to speak on a different safety topic.

Faculty Additions

The Diederich College welcomed four new faculty members in the last two years. Here’s a summary of the expertise they bring to the classrooms.

Dr. Ayleen Cabas-Mijares, assistant professor of journalism and media studies, earned her doctorate from the University of Missouri–Columbia. Her research interests include social movements and media activism; transnational feminisms and media; and Latinx studies. She is also the faculty fellow for Marquette’s Institute for Women’s Leadership.

Dr. Jaime Robb, assistant professor of communication studies, earned his doctorate from the University of South Florida. His teaching and research interests are concentrated in health communication, with a specific focus on how marginalized populations negotiate health care given their limited access to it.

For Better Outcomes

New minor focuses on how communication affects health and wellness.

This fall, the Diederich College is launching a health communication minor. Housed in the Communication Studies Department, the 18-credit curriculum is designed to help students understand how the health industry operates and how multiple processes of communication are critical to improving the emotional, mental and physical health of our society.

“With increasing attention being paid to the role of communication as being intertwined with issues of health and healing,” says Dr. Jaime Robb, assistant professor of communication studies. “By attending to the overlaps between health, culture, media, persuasion, public policy and technology, students in this minor will use a critical lens to make note of what influences our cultural understandings of health and wellness.”

Upon completion of the minor, students will understand how communication contributes to disease prevention and control, as well as how to identify and analyze communication strategies that are most effective for health and wellness promotion, according to Robb.

The new minor offers Diederich College students another opportunity to add depth to their program of study.
Unfolding Conversations

A Q&A with Dean Sarah Feldner

You’ve been a Diederich College faculty member for nearly 20 years, with administrative roles as associate dean for graduate studies and the Marquette Core Curriculum director preceding your current deanship. How has this prior experience shaped your vision for the college?

In my previous roles, I had the challenge and opportunity to revise curriculum and build new programs, work where I learned to find a balance between drawing from organizational history and embracing institutional innovation. You want to preserve your core values and traditions while being open to adopting new practices that look toward the future. I find this is a useful lens for thinking about how we adapt to change as a college.

Being named dean in a year unlike any other at Marquette (pandemic, racial justice protests, economic pressures on higher education), what have your experiences shaped your vision for the college?

In response, we worked to create meaningful space for conversations, but equally important, we made it a habit to provide time for quiet when we gathered as a community.

This year, we got better at bringing students and alumni together using technology. We had alums share how they navigated previous economic downturns; how they are responding to equity and inclusion work in their industries; and how communication professions are adapting to remote work. We learned quickly that you do not need a great deal of fanfare; we kept the connections simple and let conversations unfold. These conversations have been magical — representing where we have been and where we are going as a college.

Moving forward from the challenges of 2020, what do you perceive are the Diederich College’s strengths on which to build momentum?

The structure of our college is our greatest advantage. We are able to leverage relationships between our academic areas of strategic communication, journalism, digital media, communication studies and the performing arts because we are a college, not separate, unconnected departments of communication operating independently. For example, we are considering synergies between theatre and acting for film; we are thinking about how data informs all of our majors; and we are developing curriculum that supports using data to offer communication insights across professions.

How does the Diederich College best support its students?

Our faculty have always taken a hands-on approach to course work. No matter the subject, students are talking about current issues and how communication helps create change for the greater good. But beyond that, Diederich students benefit from what I call the curriculum on the side. Whether it is student media, the Diederich Experiences, our new Diederich Drop-ins — which all looked a bit different this past year — we are always looking to connect students with the professions, and we do so with an eye toward how they will engage in the world after Marquette.

It is not simply a question of can you perform at a job or develop a skill. It’s engaging in the “doing” of the work that pushes our students to consider how they will lead toward how they will engage in the world after Marquette. Whether it is student media, the Diederich Experiences, our new Diederich Drop-ins — which all looked a bit different this past year — we are always looking to connect students with the professions, and we do so with an eye toward how they will engage in the world after Marquette.

Communication for me is about true connection. This year we focused on creating opportunities for students, faculty and alumni to stay connected. With so many world-tilting events this past year, it became easy for us to be “logged on” to the same meeting without being present. In response, we worked to create meaningful space for conversation, but equally important, we made it a habit to provide time for quiet when we gathered as a community.

This emerging production technique is predicted to become an industry standard by 2026 and relies on the same Unreal Engine technology and content creation workflow.”

Brust also notes that real-time production makes working with Pixar-style animated characters and narratives much easier. Because this is fundamentally the same content-creation environment, the second phase of the grant-funded project is to develop a follow-up course that would expand use of the technology for real-time environment creation into characters and animation, which could, in turn, provide unique opportunities for the college’s theatre arts majors.

“It’s exciting to see traditional production expand in new ways, but also to see how these experiences open up avenues for students in other industries,” Brust says.

Game On

Students gain experience with cutting-edge 3D technology in new grant-supported course.

When Epic Games launched its $100 million MegaGrants initiative to support game developers, students and educators innovating with its 3D-creation platform Unreal Engine, Wakerly Media Lab Director James Brust thought it was an excellent opportunity to go a step further with the technology that is changing many of the industries Diederich College students are preparing to enter.

“I was excited to learn we were funded by Epic Games. I’ve already completed the first phase of our project with colleagues — developing the curriculum for Real-time Virtual Production, a digital media class available fall 2022,” he says.

When the college’s production facilities were renovated in 2018, it included a green-screen studio addition designed around Ross Voyager virtual set technology, which creates photorealistic environments that are rendered in real time and replace the green screen on live camera. At the core of that real-time rendering is the Unreal Engine platform.

The new course covers the fundamentals of working with 3D objects and environments with hands-on projects, progresses into real-time production techniques, interactivity, and prototyping in virtual reality, and ultimately students produce an environment to be used in the Ross Voyager system.

“High-end studios like ILM are moving beyond green-screen studios for productions like The Mandalorian to facilities that display these environments in real time on set,” Brust says. “This emerging production technique is predicted to become an industry standard by 2026 and relies on the same Unreal Engine technology and content creation workflow.”
As America confronts racism — past and present — alumnae experts in diversity and inclusion have been on the front lines of their organizations, striving for a better future for all.

BY LORA STRUM
Historically, corporate America did not engage with politics. Ross tells her clients this era is over. A mandate now exists for businesses to use their power to advance social causes. For organizations that don’t know how to begin, Ross recommends starting small. “Don’t boil the ocean,” she advises. “You cannot overcome 400 years of systematic racism on Juneteenth.” This incremental change should be measurable, and if successful, Ross reminds companies not to expect a thank-you. “As my mother says, ‘You don’t get credit for what you’re supposed to do.’”

Understanding that racial justice advocacy is what we’re supposed to do informed the Milwaukee Bucks’ decision to boycott Game 5 of their playoff series in summer 2020. The players walked off the court in Orlando, Florida, to protest the police-involved shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

“I hate when I hear people say athletes of any kind should shut up and dribble,” says Kareeda Chones-Aguam, Comm ’98, a senior vice president of partner strategy and management for the Bucks, 2021 NBA Champions. “Athletes can amplify messages of social equality that the average person cannot.”

Whether it’s working closely with organizations providing funding for minority businesses or creating social media content that reflects inclusive value systems, the Bucks want to use their platform for social good, Chones-Aguam says. That includes the work she does to build a more inclusive workplace. Throughout 2020, Chones-Aguam helped develop a council of about 25 Bucks employees of various backgrounds. The council’s conversations about identity and solidarity urged shapers of the company’s culture to increase and embrace diversity, including the creation of several employee resource groups within the organization.

It’s a discussion that Chones-Aguam would have relished 20 years ago when she got her start in other corporate workplaces. “It would’ve been nice to have a ‘Kareeda’ I could talk to,” Chones-Aguam says of her early career days. “That’s the main thing I wish I’d had — a diverse universe of diverse industry professionals.”

Advocating for inclusivity and equality is not a priority for everyone — including some pro-sports fans. In 2016 then-San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick received death threats when, in protest of systemic racism, he refused to stand when the national anthem was played at games. Critical or intimidating commentary, however, should not stop an organization from supporting its players of color, says Alexis McKinney, Comm ’13, the DEI content specialist for the Portland Trail Blazers.

“Shut up and dribble” is a discussion that Chones-Aguam would have relished 20 years ago when she got her start in other corporate workplaces. “It would’ve been nice to have a ‘Kareeda’ I could talk to,” Chones-Aguam says of her early career days. “That’s the main thing I wish I’d had — a diverse universe of diverse industry professionals.”

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Cultivating an audience supportive of its social justice and racial equity efforts is critical for the NBA, where a majority of its star power comes from people of color deeply affected by injustice in America, McKinney points out. Understanding how authentic storytelling — prioritizing diverse voices, aligning with community activists — combats this injustice gave McKinney an advantage when she approached Blazers leadership last summer to create the DEI specialist position she now holds.

“I hate when I hear people say athletes ... should shut up and dribble. Athletes can amplify messages of social equality that the average person cannot.”

Kareeda Chones-Aguam
“Sports are an escape for a lot of people, but there’s power in authentic stories, in making someone feel seen,” says McKinney, who produces content online, on air and in print to underscore the Blazers’ dedication to fans of all backgrounds.

McKinney’s interest in DEI has its roots at Marquette when, as an undergrad, she protested racial profiling and stigma in Milwaukee. “Marquette really shaped my desire to serve others and be the difference, which ultimately fueled my passion for equity work,” McKinney says.

“Having real passion for DEI is important — it’s not for the faint of heart,” says Dixon-Reeves, who at the start of her career was told equity work would be a “kiss of death.” Dixon-Reeves ignored this opinion and instead worked to dismantle the spaces where it was allowed to thrive. Today, after more than two decades in the DEI space, Dixon-Reeves focuses on uplifting students, faculty and staff from marginalized communities who may be underprepared to thrive in academia. Students like who she was when, as a first-generation and low-income student, she enrolled at Marquette.

“I knew absolutely nothing about academia,” Dixon-Reeves says, recalling her pre-college days. “I don’t remember anyone talking about good grades, or internships or study abroad — things I now tell my students to do.”

The programs Dixon-Reeves champions, including networking, global experiences, internships and research opportunities for nontraditional students, weren’t promoted when she was in college. But today there’s a hunger to dismantle segregated systems like the higher education admissions process. “Everyone is looking for a diversity professional now,” Dixon-Reeves says. “I look forward to there being more of us.”

Creating more diversity professionals still feels aspirational to Dixon-Reeves, especially when DEI can be stigmatized as “hand-holding” communities incapable of success. She wants to debunk the myths that inclusion is about lowering any kind of bar. “We can’t solve the world’s most pressing problems without diversity,” Dixon-Reeves says. “The research tells us that diverse teams win every time.”

Success for all communities is fostered when DEI is expansive and empathetic. Chones-Aguam has opened discussions on how to address hate crimes against Asian Americans and other marginalized groups, while McKinney hopes the inequities the coronavirus has exposed will also expose how much better we can be when we support one another.

For Chones-Aguam, it all comes together one person at a time. “If we can impress upon anyone who doesn’t believe in this space, if we change their thinking ... that’s one more person than we had yesterday,” she says.
Connecting with Community

When the Diederich Experience trips to LA, New York and Chicago were canceled, networking with alumni professionals took on a new look. Students and professors have become familiar with computer screens and video conferences over the past year. Speaker experiences especially have changed due to the pandemic, but this is a change that has had an upside for students — exposure to new faces and glances into industries they might be interested in joining once their Marquette journey is over. As part of the college’s Diederich Experiences, I had such an opportunity with members of Univision Chicago — a television station that engages with and informs the Spanish-speaking audience of the city — as they shared their career journeys in journalism, marketing and producing.

My own interests are in marketing and producing. I was quite pleased when Vice President of Content Teri Arvesu González expressed that knowing what their audience stood for helped create content that connected with and empowered their communities. The diverse team members from Univision Chicago each emphasized the key to community engagement is to listen thoughtfully. The speakers mentioned technology’s role in this engagement, as social media commentary such as Facebook comments helped guide their coverage of current events and allowed them to be a part of the community and be responsive to it.

Prior to the virtual event, I expected the panel to just be about how professionals got to their current positions. However, it was more than that. There was indeed helpful information on what to consider when pursuing a career in the fields covered in the presentation, but the focus was on how the people up front and behind the scenes worked together along with the community to create value. And I learned that value is a notion that means more to people than a fleeting sense of just being told the news without context.

Advocacy Journalism

As the pandemic shifted the O’Brien Fellowship interns’ reporting methods, it also highlighted the importance of telling stories that matter.

In any given year, starting a brand-new experience can be nerve-wracking — imagine jumping into one during a pandemic. In the fall of 2020, I became a first-year graduate student at Marquette and began my reporting journey with the O’Brien Fellowship in Public Service Journalism as an intern. I was intimidated, worried and anxious. What was supposed to be an in-person experience had shifted to the virtual environment. I had never done any kind of in-depth reporting, and now here I was conducting interviews, meetings and everything in between, all virtually.

I felt a sense of loss for human intimacy: I couldn’t see the sources I interviewed, couldn’t shadow them through their day-to-day lives, couldn’t connect as well as I wanted to. Despite these barriers, my O’Brien Fellow, Ashley Nguyen, independent journalist and former multimedia editor with The Washington Post, stepped up to the plate by becoming a reliable resource and connection that I could count on throughout a whirlwind of uncertainty. We got to know each other through safe get-togethers or occasional walks through the city, cups of coffee in hand. When our first series of stories published in The Lily, a publication of The Washington Post, I could not have been prouder. Seeing my name on a story in a prominent publication was something I never thought possible.

Even though the pandemic wreaked havoc on traditional ways of reporting, it didn’t mean what we wrote made less of a difference. By reporting on doula care, my team was able to give back to the communities of doulas with whom we talked, telling these essential birth workers’ stories with the goal of pushing for legislative and social change. Before the O’Brien internship, I knew nothing about doulas and the impact they have on maternal health outcomes. Now, I’m passionate about advocating for their role in the health care system. Without this opportunity, I wouldn’t have realized the incredible impact journalism can make on human life; it’s given me a sense of fulfillment in a year filled with tragedy.
vanessa_rivera.png

By Vanessa Rivera

Vanessa Rivera, from Zion, Illinois, is starting her senior year this fall, double majoring in journalism and digital media with a concentration in communication leadership. She is the executive news producer for the Marquette Wire. Besides playing the clarinet for the Marquette Band, she can be found tuning within Siamese cat, Luna, going out for poker and walks, crafting and baking.

I'm a very busy person given my academics, work and extracurriculars. Sitting in my seat for 20 minutes makes me cherish being in the band that much more. I take in every minute, every note and every melody I create with my fellow band players. The music really becomes a form of therapy.

I'm hopeful to continue playing with more fellow band members this fall. Given how the program responded last year, I know my final year at Marquette will give me a cherished place within the band.

By Comerford

Zoé Comerford, from Napererville, Illinois, was the executive news producer for the Marquette Wire. She graduated this May with a double major in journalism and digital media and a minor in Spanish. She enjoys talking about and watching sports, going to Cubs games, watching horror movies and travelling.

When the pandemic started, the Diederich College was extremely innovative with online experiences for students. Over the summer of 2020, Dean Sarah Feldner and Sue Cirillo (then-office associate in the Diederich College) introduced Diederich Drop-ins, where industry professionals — from journalism, digital media, public relations, advertising, etc. — meet virtually with students to talk about their respective industry, followed by a Q&A with the 50 to 150 students who attend each event. Diederich Drop-in speakers are not only extremely successful in their fields, they also provide a plethora of tips to help students learn about the industries that students will soon be entering.

As a journalism major especially interested in sports journalism, I found a majority of the early Diederich Drop-ins extremely relevant to my career aspirations. Over the summer, one of the first was with Brian Anderson, the Milwaukee Brewers’ play-by-play announcer. The second one was a panel of alums — WXYZ Detroit Sports Director Brad Galli, Comm ’11; ESPN’s Jen Lada, Comm ’02; and the Milwaukee Brewers’ Sophia Minnaert, Comm ’11; and Dallas Mavericks’ Ivy Awino, Comm ’13. The timeliest one was last October with CBS News White House correspondent Ben Tracy, Comm ’98, Grad ’04, right before the presidential election. It was a unique experience talking with someone who had covered the Trump administration. These Drop-ins are once-in-a-lifetime experiences that I only received because of Marquette.

In April I was able to participate in a Drop-in in a different way — as a moderator. Moderating was different because I was able to call our guest speaker, Mark Kasa, editor-in-chief of the Milwaukee Business Journal, prior to the event to get to know his background better and then moderate the Q&A after asking my own questions. Even though he didn’t attend Marquette, he is still part of my network because of the Diederich Drop-in, and I am always a fan of connecting with someone who is in the industry that I aspire to be in.

Though COVID-19 has changed our world, it has provided College of Communication students with rare opportunities to connect and network with some of the best in the business — many who happen to be alumni as well. Marquette’s alumni community is extremely strong. These Drop-ins have expanded my network and, in our business — especially in regards to the job search — it’s all about connections.
Brinker is now a senior researcher at the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University. He tracks student voting data, such as turnout rates, and looks for the stories within the data. Brinker wants to help universities remove barriers to voting. Are there groups of students — for example, linked by race or major — who didn’t turn out to vote? He believes that higher education can remove barriers and support students’ engagement with democracy.

Brinker first grew to love asking questions at Marquette. Professors — especially Dr. Robert Griffin, Jour ’88, now professor emeritus of journalism and media studies — inspired him to start with the questions, then find the right research method and tools to answer them. Brinker fell in love with these questions, which now drive his career.

Now, as the U.S. faces the challenge of political discordance, one of the more significant questions Brinker studies is how to foster mutual understanding and healthy political conflict. While Brinker doesn’t believe there is any single solution, he does believe that guided conversations and starting from a place of similarity rather than difference can help. But education can best break down these walls of difference, he says, as it helps people become open-minded, question their own certainty and be curious about different perspectives.

“If you find someone who disagrees with you strange or weird, it’s harder to engage with that person as a rational equal, or a person who has as much to bring to the conversation as you do,” Brinker says. “That doesn’t mean everyone should be ambivalent. But it does mean that education should make people generally more open-minded about more political questions. That can only be a good thing.” — Hal Conick

Brinker brought two groups of undergraduates students — one from urban Philadelphia and another from rural Pennsylvania — into a classroom. He asked them whether universities should allow concealed carry of firearms on campus.

The controversial topic was beside the point: Brinker wanted to find out how people create and share reasons. What influence would the students’ interpersonal relationships have on their ability to consider another person’s reasons? This would become a defining question throughout Brinker’s career.

During the discussion, one student said that anyone who would want to bring a firearm into a classroom was crazy. Another asked why someone with proper training wouldn’t carry a gun to protect their peers. It was a meeting of opposing worldviews. The students disagreed but tried understanding each other, sans yelling and belittling. They had a good conversation, Brinker says.

“That’s the magic moment that has to happen in deliberation,” Brinker says. “I’ve been chasing that feeling since then. I think my work can help do that.”

Lorna Mahlock arrived in the United States from Jamaica in 1985 at 17 years old. Just three months later, she enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Her older brother had been thinking about enlisting, but he decided the process sounded too difficult. “So I said OK, let me go talk to the recruiter,” Mahlock says.

That tenacity took Mahlock from enlisted Marine to commissioned officer. Today, she serves as brigadier general; she became the first Black woman promoted to the position in 2018.

During Mahlock’s decades-long military career, she has worked as an air command and control officer around the world, directed the Marine Corps Instructional Management School and earned multiple master’s degrees. Mahlock earned her bachelor’s degree in broadcast and electronic communication at Marquette in 1991 before becoming an officer.

“I went to an all-girls Catholic school in the Caribbean, and then coming to the Jesuit construct was very helpful to me,” Mahlock says. “The professors at the NROTC unit at Marquette really embraced the idea that in order to make folks better, you had to know their story, meet them where they were and help them on the journey.”

Over the years, Mahlock has witnessed major changes for women in the Marines: Up until 2016, women were barred from serving in combat.

“I’ve seen that barrier lifted in my career,” Mahlock says. “We’ve got women flying strike aircraft, women in the infantry and artillery and tanks. … Regardless of where you’re from or your color, gender or ethnicity, we’re just trying to figure out how to build the best fighting force.”

Today, Mahlock serves as the director of the Information, Command, Control, Communications and Computers Division, and deputy commandant for information leading the Office of the Chief Information Officer for the Marine Corps. She oversees the organization’s servers and IT equipment at bases around the world, and she is at the helm of tactical communications systems, IT compliance and cybersecurity missions.

Those behind-the-scenes systems are crucial for Marine Corps operations.

“Our reason for existing is to enable command and control and information technology that will help Marines be successful in their missions,” she says. “There are Marines going in harm’s way across the globe, so quite frankly, there is no other option here but success.”

Mahlock says she is inspired by young Marines and her conviction that “Ordinary people can do extraordinary things when they’re part of a team.”

“Every day I meet young people who reverse mentor me,” Mahlock says. “I want to help ensure that the bright young Marine with the best idea has a voice, an opportunity or a seat at the table.” — Lauren Sieben

The views presented by Brig. Gen. Lorna Mahlock, USMC, are her alone and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Defense or any of its components, nor do they represent an endorsement of the Diederich College of Communication.
Jorge Perez-Olmo uses the perseverance he practiced at Marquette to build brand success at a major retailer.

A 2-by-1-inch paper garment tag tells you everything you need to know about Jorge Perez-Olmo’s approach to his work: determination, persistence and his willingness to shake things up. It was 2008, and Perez-Olmo, Grad ’97, was senior global marketing sourcing and logistics manager at Gap, which meant he was in charge of printed materials — bags and tags, in-store marketing and shoe hangers, direct mail pieces and more. When Gap decided to adopt standards for environmentally sustainable packaging, Perez-Olmo had to find a way to get it done.

At the time, vendors weren’t used to worrying about the environment, but Perez-Olmo pressed them. “Many of them fought me tooth and nail,” he says, but he didn’t let up. A turning point came when he found a mill that could manufacture the paper that met Gap’s sustainability standards produced with 100 percent renewable energy. Perez-Olmo went on to challenge him to think harder. He had experience working at advertising firms in Puerto Rico, but studying in a second language meant extra effort and persistence. He drew on those experiences soon after graduating. When his first boss at Gap informed him that he probably wouldn’t succeed there, he remembered how he had met challenges at Marquette. He stepped back, asked himself hard questions and searched for the bigger picture. “I realized that I needed to humble down and learn from everyone.”

It paid off. In 13 years at Gap, Perez-Olmo was given increasingly greater responsibilities that often had him working extensively to help design digital experiences with AI, which he believes is leading the world into a golden age of creativity for both the consumer and creator. His mission is to amplify human creativity using technology, and he believes that AI can increase the amplification.

AI innovations, such as digital assistants, voice user interface and predictive text, are powering emerging features in design and analytics software to make these experiences possible. A whole new generation of content creators can now create videos, songs and art at the speed of thought, he says. And Duffey knows firsthand how AI can help create. He wrote his award-winning 2019 book, Superhuman Innovation: Transforming Business with Artificial Intelligence, with the help of an AI assistant as a co-author.

Duffey now works as senior strategic development manager at Adobe, running Adobe’s Creative Cloud strategic development partnerships. At Adobe, Duffey partners with creative agencies across the world, exploring how they can use technology and AI to design personalized digital experiences at scale for consumers. The industry has taken notice of his work, as Business Insider called him one of “the industry’s leaders on the top issues, challenges and opportunities in the fast-changing world of mobile marketing.”

There are now more touchpoints with consumers than ever before, Duffey says, which has turned the relationship between brands and consumers into an ongoing dialogue rather than a monologue. And this conversation must be respected by continuously providing value at every interaction point. A brand’s “North Star” in all these conversations should be to provide beneficial service for lasting relationships.

“There is an open conversation on how the relationship can be of equal value from the business and customer standpoints,” he says. “The marketing industry is finding the balance on how it can respect privacy and drive customer value.”

Personalized experiences are showcasing the business value of intelligent creativity, Duffey says. “It’s a differentiator for businesses, brands and ultimately individuals who have the capability to combine creativity plus data.” — Hal Conick
DENY GALLAGHER

Denny Gallagher reconnects professionally with his Marquette mentor to produce the Ball & Chain podcast.

They may be the MVP of Marquette mentor-mentee pairs. Then-aspiring sports reporter Denny Gallagher, Comm ’16, scored his junior year when he was matched with Sports Illustrated writer and novelist Steve Rushin, Jour ’88, Hon Deg ’07, through the Marquette Mentors program.

The two kept in touch after Gallagher graduated and moved to New York to work at Sirius XM. In 2017, Gallagher suggested Rushin start a podcast to promote the release of his memoir Sting-Ray Afternoons. Rushin liked the idea of a podcast but had a different vision in mind for its content.

“At first, I just assumed it would be a sports podcast,” Gallagher says. “But if you know Steve’s writing, you know it’s about sports but also a ‘slice of life,’ so I kind of knew that’s what we’d be getting.”

Rushin brought aboard a co-host — his wife, WBNA Hall of Famer and basketball television analyst Rebecca Lobo. Choosing a play on words for the show’s moniker, Ball & Chain (“Who’s the ball, and who’s the chain?” the theme song asks), the couple began recording from the basement of their Connecticut home. Today, more than 165 episodes have been released, garnering nearly 300 reviews on Apple Podcasts. Today, Lobo and Rushin still record the podcast from their basement studio, and as producer, Gallagher edits the audio, adds music, fixes technical issues and publishes the episodes, maintaining the professional standard and high quality they have established for the show throughout the years.

Now a producer at Sirius’ NBA Radio, Gallagher says working with Lobo and Rushin has opened doors and provided him career credibility in unexpected ways. He has formed relationships with the couple’s colleagues, friends and fellow sports journalists, such as Sam Farmer, Adam Amin and Jordan Peele.

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“Now as a producer at Sirius’ NBA Radio, Gallagher says working with Lobo and Rushin has opened doors and provided him career credibility in unexpected ways. He has formed relationships with the couple’s colleagues, friends and fellow sports journalists, such as Sam Farmer, Adam Amin and Jordan Peele, who have appeared on Ball & Chain as special guests. Ahead of a recent Sirius interview with Chicago Bulls play-by-play announcer Adam Amin, Amin already knew of Gallagher through Amin’s relationship with Lobo.

When reflecting on his collegial relationship forged with Rushin, Gallagher has some advice for current communication students in the alumni mentor program: “You’ve got to advocate for yourself. If you want to collaborate, ask the questions, and see where they lead. People are more open than you might think.”

— Elizabeth Baker, Comm ’17, Grad ’18

RETURNING THE FAVOR

Jenna Santioanni’s storybook career in the entertainment industry began with a serendipitous alumni connection.

After winning the George P. Wensel III Memorial Scholarship for digital media students, Jenna Santioanni, Comm ’06, made her “thank-you” personal. She emailed George’s brother, Brian Wensel, Bus Ad ’81, only to discover that he was a production finance executive at Paramount Pictures, where she would intern that summer. Wensel took her to lunch weekly in the Paramount dining room, introducing her to Marquette alumni on the coast. In turn, Santioanni is a mentor today for Marquette students exploring careers in the entertainment industry through the Diederich LA Experience program. A few have crashed on her couch.

A native of Whittier, California, Santioanni applied to Marquette after encouragement from her Wisconsin grandmother. On her 18th birthday, in St. John Mandel’s award-winning novel about life after a devastating pandemic.

“Read your way to the top,” she says, repeating advice she heard from Swofford. Read books, scripts and articles, she exhorts. That forms your education and makes you very willing to share their experiences and to help. A lot of times, they just don’t get taken up on it.”

— Jim Higgins, Jour ’79

St. John Mandel’s award-winning novel about life after a devastating pandemic.

For students interested in breaking into show development, Santioanni offers two pieces of advice. “Read way to the top,” she says, repeating advice she heard from Swofford. Read books, scripts and articles, she exhorts. That forms your education and makes you very willing to share their experiences and to help. A lot of times, they just don’t get taken up on it.”

— Jim Higgins, Jour ’79

St. John Mandel’s award-winning novel about life after a devastating pandemic.

THE GRAPEVINE

Jenna Santioanni, a President’s Society member
In a world of shifting values, a Diederich College of Communication degree shines out. Our students, faculty and alumni know where we stand: rooted in Jesuit tradition, engaged with today’s concerns and open to tomorrow’s possibilities. Career preparation goes further here with distinctive experiential learning opportunities that connect students with our advancing alumni and prepare them to keep pace with change. To better encourage risks and take on real-world challenges. To shape ethical communicators who ask the big questions, pursue the just answers and truly seek to Be The Difference.