



Ashley Cantwell, '05
Vice President of External Affairs, Associa

Almost four years ago, Ashley Cantwell left her comfort zone in order to continue to grow. The 2005 journalism graduate made the move from New York City to Dallas, where she joined the team at Associa. In January, Cantwell started a new role as the company's Vice President of External Affairs. She recently answered some questions about her time in Gaylord College and her career journey so far.

What is your favorite memory from your time at Gaylord College?

During my last two years at Gaylord, and well into my journalism degree, we were starting to focus on different types of public relations and how appropriate communication is critical to every aspect of business, life and success. I had always been a writer but it was during that time that I realized the importance of words and messaging. My favorite memory is working with my capstone team, an extremely talented group of budding young professionals, on a revamp campaign for a local tennis complex. It was a real company in Oklahoma City that needed public

Describe your role at Associa.

I am the Vice President of External Affairs. I oversee the development and execution of external communications plans and programs to support, promote, and protect Associa's business objectives as well as provide strategic situational and crisis counsel in the US, Canada, and Mexico. In addition to reputation management and proactive public relations duties, I also manage the company's corporate citizenship programs including Associa Supports Kids (ASK), Associa Green, The Great Giveback program, The Marianna Brady, PhD. Scholarship Program, National Night Out (NNO) and more. I am the trusted communications advisor to our senior executives, branch leaders, and client boards and have focused on transforming the external communications process and media response efforts.

What do you consider to be the most significant moments of your career so far?

From the outside looking in, many would think that moving to New York

relations, marketing and communications support. That was my first experience applying my newly acquired communications skills to help fix a problem and it truly started me on my career path.

Also, hearing the song "Take Me Out" by Franz Ferdinand always makes me smile. It was the song we played for our final capstone presentation.

How did your career path lead you to Associa?

My career path has been a combination of taking chances, hard work and sheer luck. Throughout most of my time at Gaylord, I believed that I knew exactly what I wanted to do – entertainment public relations. The summer before my senior year, I was given the life-changing opportunity to be an intern at one of the most prestigious entertainment public relations firms in Hollywood, California. I was excited, nervous and ready. I moved to Hollywood for the summer and was given a first-hand look into the career and life that I always thought I wanted. After three months, I knew that the entertainment public relations industry was not the communications focus that I wanted to pursue. After I graduated college, I realized that I needed to go in a completely different direction so I packed two bags, bought a plane ticket and moved to New York City. At the time, I didn't know anyone, I had one job interview lined up, and no place to live. Luckily, that one job interview was for the leading crisis public relations firm in the world and they hired me. I was at Sitrick and Company for almost eight years, where I learned from the top crisis public relations minds in the business. I specialized in corporate restructuring communications and crisis management – and loved every second of it. After eight years at Sitrick, a colleague and I were recruited by a restructuring company to help build their communications platform. For two years, we worked diligently to create a new communications business. It was one of the best and hardest times in my career. But that unique experience made me grow as a professional and a leader. After 10 years in NYC, I decided that I wanted to be closer to my family and move into a more traditional public relations role. Associa, the industry's largest community management company, was my first and only interview when I moved to Dallas. I

City would have been the most significant moment in my career. And while it shaped me in more ways than I can express – leaving New York City was the most significant moment of my life.

I worked in New York City as a strategic communications consultant. As a consultant, I worked with many high-profile clients, world-wide, creating and successfully implementing internal and external communication strategies. I traveled a ton, met incredible people and lived an exciting lifestyle. But after 10 years, I had become too comfortable in my career and in my life. That is why leaving New York City, something that had become a part of my identity, is the most significant moment of my career. It took me leaving my comfort zone and starting over in a new city to grow professionally, personally and emotionally. It took that leap to truly find out what I was made of as a public relations professional and as a person.

How did Gaylord College prepare you for your future career?

Gaylord College undoubtedly gave me the tools I needed to succeed in the professional world. The curriculum was tough and the professors held each student to an extremely high standard. My time there taught me to be accountable, work hard, be organized and how to meet hard deadlines. Each one of those important qualities I use to this day, for myself and with my team.

What advice would you give to current students aspiring to a career in mass communication?

My practical advice to any student - participate in as many internships as you can. My internship changed the trajectory of my career and put me on the path to find my true passion.

My personal advice to any student - take chances. You'll never know the amazing things you can accomplish without taking a chance on yourself. As cliché as it sounds, no one ever learned anything profound from always being successful.

What do you do for fun outside of work?

I live a very healthy and active lifestyle – one that I developed while at the University of Oklahoma as a member of the track and field team. I have always been a runner and continue that hobby

knew from the moment I sat in the interview chair that this was where I was meant to be. I have been an Associa team member for almost four years and counting.

today. I have two amazing dogs, Walter and Sulley, and enjoy taking them to White Rock Lake and throwing around a tennis ball. I am also an avid baker and will challenge anyone to a chocolate chip cookie bake-off.



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