Graduate not ‘mellow’ about future success:
Internship leads to marketing director job for SOC alumna

by Alex Fiorello

Walking into Mellow Mushroom restaurant, one might spot Marissa Ihus engaged in conversation with customers amidst the tables and pleasing aroma of pizza. Observers might also notice that the affable Ihus speaks to customers as if she has known them for years.

Ihus majored in communication with a concentration in public relations and graduated in May of 2012 from ECU. She started her first internship her sophomore year with Inner Banks Media Group as an unpaid intern and eventually was hired as a part-time employee.

Her part-time responsibilities included doing promotional work for the company’s radio station, Star 94.3. In October 2011, the station kicked off a new on air show called the Greenville Grapevine, featuring prominent women in the community who discussed Greenville-related events. Ihus was the producer and also a cohost.

Since graduating, she has landed the position of marketing director for Capital Food Group, which owns and operates two Mellow Mushroom locations in North Carolina. She oversees all promotional and marketing aspects of each.

“Whether it’s teaming up with nonprofits or recording spots for radio stations, I do anything to gain revenue and exposure,” she says.

These establishments are located in Greenville and Fayetteville, while there is another being built in Morehead City, N.C., meaning Ihus travels quite often. She says she doesn’t mind because it gives her a chance to think about upcoming events and plan accordingly.

The travelling also means that Ihus gets to interact with a variety of people.

“Everyone is a joy to work with and each store brings a different energy,” she relates. Courtney Stephens, an employee at Mellow Mushroom in Greenville, says she enjoys working with Ihus.

“She is always very helpful and full of ideas,” says Stephens. “It’s refreshing working with such a great team and Marissa definitely brings a lot to the table.”

These local Mellow Mushroom stores are not Ihus’ final destination, however. She wants to move to Atlanta, which is where the corporate headquarters are located.

“I want to eventually be in charge of all 135-plus Mellow Mushroom stores,” she says. Ihus also plans to further her ECU education by enrolling in graduate school.
Erin McDonald, a communication major at ECU, tosses t-shirts out to the boisterous Pirate fans during a women’s soccer game against High Point. Even though it’s raining, McDonald looks more than happy to be supporting her fellow Pirates while promoting the team and their accomplishments.

McDonald is an intern for the marketing branch of the Athletic Department at ECU. She works with the coaches and players at sport events, and coordinates all of the promotional and public events.

Athletic Marketing hires between six and a dozen students each year to assist with event management.

“We’ve begun or developed several new initiatives over the past year and a half that have become a focal point for these students,” said Michael Weller, director of Commercial Marketing. The event management side of the position deals directly with the public, including hospitality services during pre-game events, general customer service, and fan engagement for participation in gameday promotions.

The main event of the year is ECU’s annual “Meet the Pirates,” which includes inflatable jumpers, food, and a meet-and-greet for fans to interact with the Pirate athletes.
“It was so cool to be on the field and get to be active and close with the players,” McDonald said.

McDonald has the opportunity of experiencing what goes on behind the scenes of every game or event. Instead of being a fan in the stands of the football game, she gets to be on the field making sure everything is up to par from a public relations standpoint.

“We do a halftime promotion where we’ll actually pick students from the stands to come down and participate,” she related. “We also get to help with the ‘purple haze’* when the players run out at the start of the game.”

Marketing can be a significant part of any event, job, company or program. Interning with the athletic department submerges students into a working, yet entertaining environment, according to McDonald.

In addition to career experience, the interns also have the benefit of meeting other students with the same career goals. Maggie Craig, also a communication major at ECU and McDonald’s co-intern, emphasizes the advantages of working with students with the same interests.

“At first I looked at all the people I work with as competition but once I got to know everyone and realized how much we had in common, they turned into some of my best friends. We always have interesting conversations about the field of communication, where we see ourselves after college, and, best of all, we can help one another with our classes,” Craig stated.

Weller noted that new initiatives for Craig and other interns involve a student reward program for attending athletic events, called Plunder Points, as well as a renewed focus on connecting with students on campus.

“We have focused on hiring individuals like Maggie, Erin, and others, who are involved in other activities—such as Greek Life, SAB, Residence Life, and other organizations—to help us find new ways to interact with students and ultimately build a larger audience for the seven sports we focus on in terms of attendance support,” Weller said. He added that the interns’ work has been vital in providing feedback about events as well as helping adapt the incentive system, campus advertising, and finding better ways to mobilize different elements of the student body.

“It has been extremely helpful to have people like Erin and Maggie that are driven to succeed and excited about being part of our organization,” Weller said.

Communication students interested in on- or off-campus internships and organizations looking for communication interns can contact Dr. Pamela Hopkins, School of Communication Internship Coordinator at hopkinsp@ecu.edu.

*According to the East Carolina University Official Athletic Site: “Purple Haze,” the classic Jimi Hendrix tune, is played prior to the start of every home football game as the Pirates take to the field through a cloud of purple smoke.
East Carolina University junior, Alex Gajewski, lives by three words — “determination, passion and fun” — and strives to become a sports broadcaster.

Gajewski also largely attributes his college achievements to the School of Communication.

“My professors are always here to help, no matter what it is,” he says. “All you have to do is ask and they will help you get internships, write letters of recommendation and do what’s in their power to help you succeed.”

During the spring 2012 semester, Gajewski worked for WNCT-TV sports broadcaster Brian Bailey as part of the internship-for-credit program. He edited video, wrote shot sheets and helped come up with ideas for the newscast. He also attended basketball and baseball games, recording video for highlights.

This past summer, he worked for the Charlotte Eagles, a USL division soccer team. Gajewski says he uploaded team videos onto the internet.

“If the (soccer) videos were not uploaded by a certain time, the team would be fined. I liked that I was given a large amount of responsibility.”

Gajewski is presently involved in two internships. He is working for ESPN Radio as well as ECU Media Relations with Malcom Gray, an East Carolina University alumnus.

Relating that he feels blessed that so many people have been willing to help him throughout his early career, Gajewski plans on helping as many others as he can in the future, especially if they have ties to ECU. Gajewski hopes to become a broadcaster for ESPN and is in the process of applying for internships with the sports network.

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Greenville Museum of Art
April 20, 2013
Kathryn Mullins, a communication student concentrating in public relations and journalism at East Carolina University, completed a four-month internship at Live Nation Entertainment over the summer.

Live Nation is an American entertainment company formed from the merger of Live Nation and Ticketmaster. After the 2010 merger, the company is now a leader in promoting, selling and producing concerts.

In Raleigh, N.C., Live Nation has two concert venues, the Time Warner Cable Pavilion and the Raleigh Amphitheatre. Mullins spent her summer between the two, working a total of 14 shows. Some of her responsibilities included keeping track of the money spent on marketing leading up to the concerts and reporting back to the tour managers. On the days of shows, she would work with radio stations and coordinate photographers for the artists. Mullins had opportunities to network with some of the biggest names in the industry, from talking to people behind the scenes backstage to riding on golf carts with one of the biggest country artists in the nation.

“Before the Jason Aldean and Luke Bryan concert, I was in charge of setting up the radio interviews for local country music radio stations,” said Mullins. “When we went to pick up Luke Bryan for his interviews, I got to ride on the back of a golf cart with him back to the press junket. It was so nerve-wracking to sit next to such a celebrity, but he was so down to earth and such a gentleman.”

But it wasn’t just the celebrities that Mullins loved. “By working for Live Nation this summer, I really feel like I have learned so much. I was given a lot of responsibility, which allowed me to learn things that I couldn’t have anywhere else.”

Daniel Wiseman, an advisor for East Carolina University’s School of Communication, stresses the importance of an internship. “Communications is very broad,” says Wiseman. “There are a lot of different specializations, which makes it hard to find a niche. Without experience from an internship, you are a wild card. And in this economy, and with all of the competitive students graduating from college and also searching for jobs, you cannot afford to be a wild card.”
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