Interview with Ann Marie Varga

Q: Please tell us about your current position.
A: In my current position as Communications Manager for Orange County, I am responsible for the overall planning, coordination, organization and direction of the communication strategies and public information activities for Orange County, which is home to more than 1.2 million residents and a top destination for more than 62 million travelers and tourists from around the world. I lead the activities of three offices — public relations, graphics and the County’s government television station. I have spent my entire career in the fascinating field of public relations. I love what I do and do what I love.

Q: In what ways do you think education as a communication student prepared you for your career? Was there a particular communication class that impacted your career choice/development?
A: Way back in “the day” when I started at Rollins, I knew that I loved to write and I thought I wanted to go into radio or television. At the time I didn’t know what public relations was (and there were no classes at Rollins) so I majored in English/Communications. My on-air stint with an interview show on WPRK sparked a love of reporting in me, but an internship at a local radio station quickly cured me of wanting to pursue a career on the air. Then, after graduation, I literally “joined the circus” when I answered an ad for a writer at Circus World, a theme park then located southwest of Walt Disney World. My love of reporting and writing was put to great use and it really was the coolest job in the world! I got to play with baby elephants, Michael Jackson used to come regularly to ride our wooden rollercoaster, and I worked with media from around the world during a time when the news was balanced and much more manageable. While it was baptism by fire as I learned on the job about public relations, issues management and crisis communication, today’s 24/7 news cycle and citizen journalism is much more difficult. It makes getting ahead of the news impossible. This field is definitely never boring.

Q: What was your most memorable moment of your time as student at Rollins?
A: That’s a tough question to answer because I was a student twice — 30 years apart! And I had the privilege of working on staff at Rollins as Assistant Vice President of Public Relations and Community Affairs for over a decade. Rollins was a huge part of my life for decades and I love the community and the campus. I think my most memorable student moment is from my graduate years. My son and I received an MBA and MHR respectively two weeks apart. I took my gown to his graduation and the picture of us together in our caps and gowns is prominently showcased in my office. It was such a proud moment. Education is an invaluable gift. We should all strive to learn something new every day.

Q: What advice would you give to current students?
A: First, leave your ego at the door. Whether you’re a rookie or a veteran in your field, you will gain more through an attitude of appreciation than entitlement. There’s a huge divide between being confident and being cocky. I guarantee there will always be someone that knows more than you do … no matter your age. Second, embrace change. The field of communications has changed so much since I started my career and it will definitely continue to change. If you don’t adapt and seek out innovation, you will be left behind.