

Former *Breezers* back together at Rhudy & Co.

Shared Madison Experiences strengthen public relations team

BY SANDE SNEAD ('82)

When *Breeze* Managing Editor Donna Dunn ('94) hired Nicole Motley ('95) as co-news editor in 1993, Motley took Dunn aside and told her that she just didn't think she could work with Drew van Esselstyn ('94). Drew, likewise, held a private meeting with *The Breeze* managing editor and said that he was pleased to be hired as co-news editor as well, but he just didn't think he could work with "that girl, Nicole Motley." Wait for it ... yes, the co-news editors are now married.

Nearly two decades later Dunn and Nicole Motley van Esselstyn are still friends and both work for Richmond, Va.,-based Rhudy & Co., owned by fellow *Breezer* Jonathan Rhudy ('95) and his wife, Michele.

"There's something about those long nights at *The Breeze*, eating pizza every Wednesday and Sunday night in the basement of Anthony-Seeger," says Rhudy. "You really form tight bonds. And *The Breeze* was the best classroom of all. Donna and Nicole are both accomplished journalists, and JMU gave us all that foundation."

The Breeze has been JMU's award-winning student newspaper since 1922. Currently, the newspaper prints 9,500 copies and is distributed on campus every Monday and Thursday. It is also available online (www.breezejmu.org) and there are, of course, social media connections. That was not the case in the mid-1990s.

"We used Macs and still used X-Acto knives to cut out the copy," recalls Rhudy. "Then, we ran it through wax machines to paste up the pages. Invariably there were run-ins with the X-Acto knives, and many nights we were still pasting up the last pages as the printer from Martinsburg, W.Va., waited."

Van Esselstyn also remembers the close friendships: "JMU has that small-school feel. You are truly able to know the people you go to school with, so friendships develop that can withstand the test of time."

Rhudy reconnected with Dunn at the 2008 memorial service for a favorite journalism professor, Flip DeLuca. "We both thought a lot of Flip," Dunn says. "When I found out Jonathan had his own

communications and marketing company, I told him, 'Flip would be proud.' JMU and *The Breeze* literally brought us back together."

Shortly after Dunn began working with Rhudy & Co., her long-time friend, van Esselstyn joined the staff. What is interesting about the close-knit friends and co-workers is that they live spread out all along the East Coast. Dunn lives in Lynchburg, Va., Rhudy in Richmond and van Esselstyn in Lebanon, N.J.

Yet, they work together seamlessly.

"Nicole and I are from the same hometown and we went to high school together," Dunn says. "So we had the same writing and communication teachers our whole lives. We have the same foundational knowledge, follow the same rules and work well together. We remember well what JMU journalism professor Dave Wendelken used to say about the importance of the nut graph." [i.e., the story in a nutshell].

Michele Rhudy founded Rhudy & Co. in 2003 after nine years at CRT/tanaka, Virginia's largest public relations firm. The following year Jonathan followed his wife and left CRT as well. The husband-wife team works from their home and manages an eight-person team specializing in strategic communications planning,

public relations and marketing, employee communications and editorial services.

The small company has amassed an impressive array of clients, notably Bon Secours Virginia Health System, Hamilton Beach, Luck Stone Corp., among others.

"When you work remotely the way we all do, you have to know and trust the person you don't see face to face all the time," says Dunn. "You have to know that if you leave a phone message or send an e-mail, that the other person received it and will act upon it. That's where our JMU friendships come in. We all enjoy working together."

Rhudy concurs.

"Our shared Madison Experience really goes deep," Rhudy says. "I've known Donna and Nicole longer than I've known my wife. We have an incredible amount of trust and respect for each other, and we continue to learn from each other." ❧



Former *Breeze* staff members say their shared Madison Experiences and friendships make the working environment at Rhudy & Co. a trusting and respectful one. Left to right are Nicole Motley ('95), Jonathan Rhudy ('95) and Donna Dunn ('94).

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