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Communicating for a Cause

By Yvonne Bokhour

As advocates — particularly Sarah Lawrence advocates — we are determined to make a difference. We bring passion, dedication and knowledge to our missions. One of the most remarkable aspects of my experience at Sarah Lawrence was absorbing the excitement of my fellow students, who were all incredibly enthusiastic. It was inspiring to see so many ardent, intelligent people firmly committed to health advocacy.

We write a lot at Sarah Lawrence and therefore know from first-hand experience how difficult it can be to express our ideas coherently. Writing an academic paper may be daunting, but presenting your ideas to the public or your colleagues can be equally intimidating. Passion and knowledge are not enough; to be truly effective, you must find a way to engage your audience.

I came to Sarah Lawrence as an established grassroots organizer with some experience writing press releases. I wrote from the heart, which certainly helped me connect with my readers. Nevertheless, I knew I needed more substantive tools to make my case. I had heard that Kovak-Likly Communications, a public relations firm based in my home town of Wilton, Connecticut, specialized in health care, so I approached the principals, Beth and Bruce Likly, with a request. I asked if they would consider helping my nonprofit organization, which raises funds for Lyme disease research. They graciously agreed, knowing Lyme disease is a significant problem in our community. Then I realized I could work and learn at the same time as an intern. They were kind enough to take me on, and I have been with them ever since.

Kovak-Likly has been a potent force in the health care industry for many years, representing a variety of clients from pharmaceutical companies to medical device manufacturers to nonprofit organizations. They have also forged partnerships between these entities, implementing strategies to promote mutual goals. Before I came to work with them, I had vague notions about the importance of a good letter to the editor or an effective press release. Now I know that numerous public relations tools and techniques can play a vital role in improving public health.

Since my graduation, I have been working with the Liklys and my colleagues at KLC to expand our nonprofit portfolio. I feel fortunate to have their enthusiastic support in this effort. There are countless ways public relations can assist nonprofits to promote their healthcare missions. For example, public relations can help you:

- **Craft an effective message.** It's crucial to refine your communication goals. Advocates need key message points with substance, focus, clarity and resonance.
- **Give an engaging presentation.** It's important to convey points clearly and confidently, whether you are persuading policymakers, presenting research or fundraising.

- **Attract attention to your cause. Advocates need to know their audience and find the best delivery vehicle to reach that audience. PR professionals specialize in creative strategies to publicize your message to targeted markets. Tools include press releases, press conferences, educational forums, celebrity spokespeople, speech writing, brochures, newsletters, media training, website development and Internet messaging.**
- **Conduct a successful interview. It's vital to know the ground rules of media relations. Learning interview dos and don'ts, coping methods for difficult situations and memorable phrasing can shape a debate and propel your cause forward.**
- **Develop mass media campaigns. Television commercials and other mass media vehicles including the Internet have been particularly effective in promoting health—they have had a measureable effect, for example, on people's smoking habits and have become a crucial component in international tobacco control.**
- **Use media technology to promote health. Did you know you can help patients find care via text messaging? As an example, it's now possible to find an HIV testing center near you simply by texting your zip code to "KNOWIT" (566948). With today's exciting advances in digital media and interactive telecommunications, the possibilities for imaginative health education strategies are endless.**

Sarah Lawrence is a remarkable place to learn varied aspects of health advocacy—from physiology to ethics to policy. Communicating this complex knowledge in a practical manner—one that can educate, inspire and move the public and policymakers—would be a meaningful goal for any graduate of the program. Public Relations would be a wonderful career choice for HAP alumni, but whatever path you choose, it is important to recognize that cutting edge communications techniques and technologies play an increasingly vital role in advancing the field of health advocacy.