



Ready for the ROAD AHEAD

Journalism alumna Jill Gregory steers marketing efforts for NASCAR

BY CATHY ENNS

Even when the road ahead travels a straight line, you don't often see the path clearly until you have the chance to look back.

Such is the experience of Jill Gregory (B.S., Journalism, 1988), who serves as an executive at NASCAR heading up key brand marketing initiatives. That's

why, Gregory says, the foundation of core skills and practical knowledge Cal Poly offers—plus opportunities to get your hands dirty—is uniquely valuable. Graduates are ready to take risks; prepared to step through doors they never imagined would open.

"You can tell by all the successes that come out of the university," Gregory said.

She should know. After growing up in a farming town in California's Central Valley, Gregory, who had an interest in sports but not much knowledge of auto racing, is now vice president of industry services at one of the largest and most successful racing organizations on the planet.

She suggests today's students do as she did: build core skills and take advantage of every hands-on opportunity available. You never know, she said, what the road ahead may bring.

Gregory's route took her from her first job at a sports marketing agency in San Francisco to strategic marketing roles at Texaco, Sprint/Nextel and Bank of America. In each position she focused on using sports as a platform for promoting her company's brands.

At Texaco in the late 1990s she first explored what a relationship with NASCAR could do for a corporation. Today, Gregory and her department of 14 marketing professionals reach out to those same companies and many more of the country's largest corporations, encouraging them to invest in a partnership with NASCAR.

Gregory also develops programs that ensure NASCAR is engaging and exciting to both current and new fans. As part of the Driver Star Power platform, she and her team work with entertainment industry powerhouses — including Disney, NBC and TBS — to showcase charismatic NASCAR personalities such as Jimmie Johnson, Jeff Gordon and Kyle Larson. The program has resulted in appearances for popular drivers on shows such as "Celebrity Apprentice," "Sullivan & Son" and the Radio Disney Music Awards.

Gregory's relationship skills and broad industry experience led to her recruitment for another role. She is a board member for the NASCAR Foundation, an organization that supports communities in which auto racing is prominent. She takes tremendous pride in the foundation, commenting on how gratifying it is to "see your efforts come to life."

"We have the responsibility to give back to our fans and to the issues that are important to them," she said.

Among many other causes, the NASCAR Foundation has contributed \$15 million to build Speediatrics centers at two Florida hospitals, where children undergo intensive treatment in a cheerful, healing environment.

The opportunity to build relationships within an accessible community—advantages of Cal Poly and its setting—was one of the main reasons Gregory chose Cal

Poly over other universities that initially interested her. She visited two leading schools in Los Angeles and then stopped at Cal Poly on her way home.

"The minute I stepped on campus, I knew this is where I wanted to go," she said. "I did not look at another school." She felt she had discovered a "big time university in an area you could actually navigate." She remembers experiencing a compelling sense of community on campus and in San Luis Obispo.

Gregory's love of writing led her to join the journalism program. At the same time, she enjoyed sports and was interested in learning more about sports marketing. "I wanted to find out if there was a career there," she said.

In true Learn by Doing fashion, Gregory got the chance to work at the Mustang Daily and in local broadcast media. "Cal Poly encourages you to go to work before it's time to go to work," she said, laughing. Among other insights she gained, she remembers coming to an understanding of what she didn't want to do in her career. On-air broadcasting was one field she decided was not for her.

What did strike her was the value of developing core communications skills. "I realized that if you're a good communicator, more opportunities come your way," she said. "Mastery of basic skills creates options to do many things, meaning you won't find yourself in a silo."

From her days at Cal Poly, through assignments in six large U.S. cities with Fortune 500 companies, to NASCAR headquarters across the country in Charlotte, N.C., Gregory's career is proof that it's not so important for a Cal Poly student to know exactly where they want to go. She suggests today's students do as she did: build core skills and take advantage of every hands-on opportunity available. You never know, she said, what the road ahead may bring.



Jill Gregory, a 1988 journalism grad and marketing executive with NASCAR.

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JILL GREGORY