



## Ep. 15: Monique Kelley (COM'03), Weber Shandwick SVP and Global Client Experience Lead

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Recently named one of [PR News' Top Women in PR for 2019](#), **Monique Kelley (COM'03)** serves as Senior Vice President and Global Client Experience Lead in the Healthcare department at Weber Shandwick. During her time at BU, Monique uncovered her passion for public relations and found invaluable mentors along the way. On the podcast, Monique shares lessons she's learned through professional resiliency and advice on how to build a powerful network to support your career success.

### Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast. My guest today is Senior Vice President for healthcare at PR firm Weber Shandwick, Monique Kelly. Monique graduated from the College of Communication in the class of 2003, and since then she's become a true industry leader. Monique joined me on the podcast to reflect back on her time at BU and explore the lessons she's learned from the fast-paced and highly competitive landscape of Public Relations. Monique Kelly, thanks so much for joining us on the Proud to BU podcast.

Monique Kelley: Thanks Jeff.

Jeff Murphy: I normally would welcome you back to campus. We're delighted to have you in studios with us today, but I know that you've been here at time. You live in Boston, you get to campus quite often, right?

Monique Kelley: I do, I do. I'm very lucky in that since I moved back from New York where I was after college, I came back here and kept in touch with all of my professors. So Professor Quigley, Professor Downes, they're here and really enabled me the opportunity to guest lecture for everything from Communications Writing, which is a required class, to Media Relations. So it's great to be on the other side of those classes and being able to lend my experiences to the current students.

Jeff Murphy: I certainly have a lot of questions ask you about that, but I always kind of go chronologically. Are you originally from Massachusetts or New York?

Monique Kelley: I'm from South Jersey. I'm proud. And it's funny because a lot of these days it's all around Eagles fans and Eagles country. So, I was raised an Eagles fan. I actually was on the Randall Cunningham show. My father took us when we were a little, so we're big, proud Philly sports fans. But I found my way here at BU when I actually, I'm sad to say, I went to the open house and the open house was in Philadelphia. And again, my dad and I went, and I thought that the cookies that was at that open house we're so great. And I remember, you know, talking to folks that were there, the recruiters, and they were telling me all around,

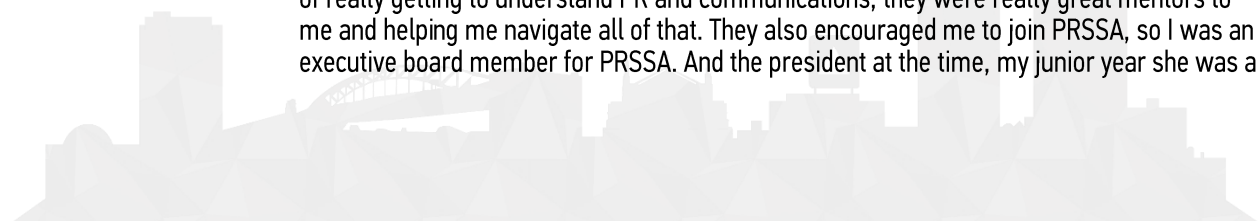
the college is diverse and it's a great opportunity and it's a city and all of this. And I just kept thinking to myself, what amazing cookies, like if the college had these types of cookies, I think I need to be there. But it's interesting that the recruiters talked a lot about diversity because for me I grew up very diverse. So, my mom is an immigrant from Iran, Tehran, Iran, and my dad is from New Jersey, born and raised, but he's African American and a bodybuilder. He was actually former Mister New Jersey in 1987. So for me, sports, athletics, diversity, it was always a normal thing. So when I found myself at BU, I was a walk-on on the track team, to continue on with the upbringing that I had that really focused on fitness. And so I met with Coach Bruce Lehane, the late, great Coach Bruce Lehane, and he took a chance on me and I was a walk-on track runner. And so that's how it really started for me, getting to BU and moving from Jersey to Boston. Unfortunately I think most of my running career, I was injured. I spent more time with the athletic trainers than I did my own teammates, really. All kinds of injuries. And I think it happens from going from being a short distance runner in high school to really being more of a longer distance runner in college. That to me was something that I struggled with, but also I have really fond memories in terms of the relationships that I built with my teammates, including my best friend who's children I'm godmother to. But I ended up kind of stumbling into Public Relations when again, this love of fitness and health really drove me to nutrition. At the time I was in the College of Arts and Sciences moving to Sargent and I thought, I want to be a nutritionist, I want to do anything health and fitness. That is my calling in life. But I failed biology, I was in the pre-med biology course and completely failed. I had never failed anything in my life. And again, to me that was a shock and something that I really had to really think long and hard in terms of, what am I doing here? I have to graduate with something, you know, some kind of degree, but what that degree is and what I should be doing with my life, if it's not nutrition, I had no clue about. So with that very same best friend/track teammate who was already in the College of Communication and she was a PR major and she said, "Hey, look, why don't you try PR? I like these courses. I know you like writing, you have a passion for gab clearly, so you know, why don't you try it out?"

Jeff Murphy: When was this conversation? You came in as a first year student at CAS. And so, did you feel at home at BU right away? I mean, was it a bad fit in addition to not doing so well academically?

Monique Kelley: No, I actually think it was a good fit. So how I grew up with, or certainly not, you know, as nice of a city as BU is. But I really do think again, with the cookies and also I talk about this a lot with my husband, He's like, "I've never seen any students go-" because at the time we were dating when I was in college and I used to tell him about the lobster nights. I used to tell him about all this stuff. Again, it always revolves around food with me. Food and running. And he's like, "good God, what kind of- you have a great college experience." And so for me, I had a good community and definitely with the track team. Bu I think I really felt more of a community at BU when I fell into PR in the College of Communication.

Jeff Murphy: And when did that happen?

Monique Kelley: So that was around my junior year when I took, I remember the Media Relations class with Dr. Downes, who was someone who was just a great teacher inside the classroom and out. As well as Steve Quigley. Both of them I attribute my career to because they made PR so passionate. They, for me, they helped me get my first internship. They helped me even figure out decisions in terms of, do I continue to go to school and get a master's or do I go out in the real world first? Any type of thoughts or nerves or challenges that I had in terms of really getting to understand PR and communications, they were really great mentors to me and helping me navigate all of that. They also encouraged me to join PRSSA, so I was an executive board member for PRSSA. And the president at the time, my junior year she was a



senior Kori Kenjer. She and I are very close friends and she teases me, she's like, "You used to come to these things with like ice on your leg." She knew track was a big part of my life, but also PR ended up starting to be a real part of my life as well.

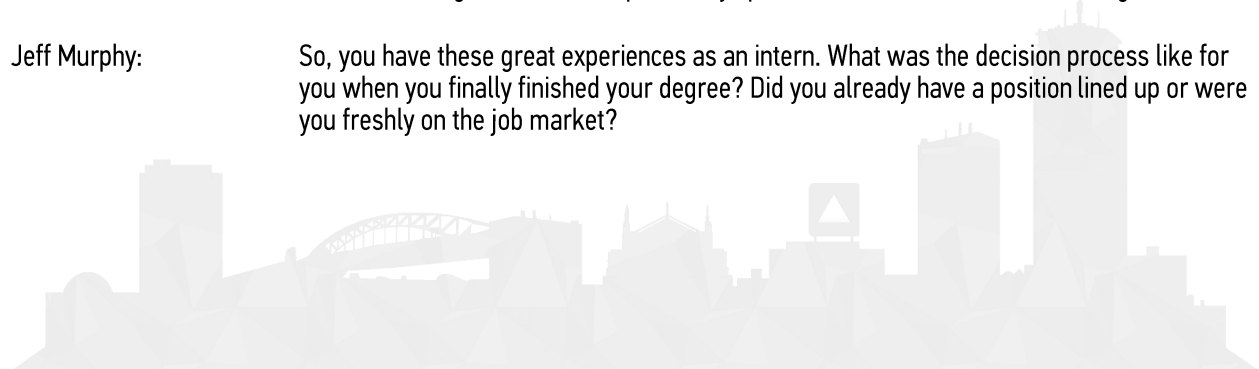
Jeff Murphy: I'm curious about your experience as a student athlete. Was it a challenge to balance, I can only assume a super demanding training schedule, with classes and things like that? And I know BU's got a great track program. You're traveling all over the country, I'm guessing on weekends. So what was that like for you to, to balance those two competing passions?

Monique Kelley: I think for me, I'm a type-A person who loves focus. So I think that's what frankly kept me out of trouble. I always heard about the college stories and the "freshmen fifteens" and gaining weight. I'm like, what are you talking about? I lost weight. I was in the best shape of my life actually. I was training and running every single day. And again, I looked at that as a great way to do what I love to do, which was health and fitness and running. But also that was my network. That was my friends, my friends were on the team, you would be able to train with them, eat with them, go to study hall with them. It was funny because we had a couple of professional hockey players that went to the NHL as well in our little group. So yeah, I mean I have really fun memories. Even though I was injured, I actually had a stress fracture in my femur, so a femoral stress fracture, which can be incredibly debilitating. And just being able to work through that. After I had that, that was my junior year, coming back after doing pool running and strength training for 10 months and having to come back and that first meet that I ended up running was an America East Meet and PRing in the 1500 meters. That was a big critical moment for me as well. I really started to get these life lessons early that like, giving up is not an option and things happen that are sometimes out of your control. I definitely resented that, why am I the one getting injured and not others? But being able to figure out if life gives you something, a challenge, figuring out what you can do and what you can contribute to really get through it.

Jeff Murphy: So before I ask you about your professional career, I know from looking at your LinkedIn profile, you also had a couple internships while you were a student athlete. I'm curious to know if, those were at sort of fairly big agencies from what I know about the PR world, did those experiences kind of solidify for you that you were totally on the right track? And did that play a role in, in sort of helping you figure out what you were going to do after you graduated?

Monique Kelley: Absolutely. What I loved about PR and the degree in Communications is that there are so many different avenues you can take. So I ended up doing an internship at a small agency that was based in Connecticut, but down here by the wharf, I also did an agency, Cone Communications in their new business department. I think that's where I really started to understand the importance and value of new business, even though it's something at an agency that is non-billable, meaning you're not really generating revenue yet until you get that business. And then I also interned at the College of Fine Arts here which also gave me a lot of great experience from the Media Relations standpoint, but working for a university. So I had a diverse experience in PR, but I always knew I wanted to do PR. Um, And at that point, based on the classwork and the work that Professor Downes did for the Media Relations courses, I thought I wanted to specifically specialize in Media Relations when I graduated.

Jeff Murphy: So, you have these great experiences as an intern. What was the decision process like for you when you finally finished your degree? Did you already have a position lined up or were you freshly on the job market?



Monique Kelley:

Oh No. And again, that type A in me was very nervous about, wait a minute, what am I going to do after? How am I going to get a job? Am I going to get a job at one of the places where I interned? What if timing didn't work out? Because a lot of these things are timing. And the market here is relatively small, things aren't going to open up every day for a communications job. So really going back to my experiences on the executive board for PRSSA, my friend Kori, who was the president, she graduated a year before me. So Kori was already working at a small IR firm, Investor Relations firm in New York. And so when I graduated, I didn't think I was going to go to New York. You know, I wasn't one of these people- where I grew up in New Jersey was much closer to Philly. I didn't think I was going to be one of these people that just up and moved and started a new life. I really liked Boston and I wanted to stay in Boston. Um, but I wasn't finding a job. I wasn't really finding a lot of opportunities. I remember sending my resume to everybody. I took a bus to Waltham, back then Waltham to me was like, oh my God, it's so far like I'm going across the country. But I remember taking buses and trains and planes, whatever I needed to do to get myself out there because that was always, kind of again where I'm from and how I'm raised, you got to figure out what you're going to do and you are responsible for finding that career. And I also knew I had a great degree. Professors that were my mentors who are supportive of me and everything on paper looked right, I just had to find the job. So Kori, thankfully a month after graduation had an opening at her firm and she asked me, she said, "Well, you know, it's an Investor Relations firm," and to this day IR, the words, I cringe. I'm like, I'm not that great with the numbers, revenue and all these other things, just whatever. But she said, "No, Monique, you would be doing the Media Relations portion of it. You would just be on the phone with reporters pitching and that's what you love to do." So I took the train, went to New York, interviewed with Diana Brainard who was the president of her firm, private company and I ended up getting the job. And so again, sometimes you don't necessarily have the plan laid out that you're going to move to New York and you're going to start your career there. But for me it was a job and I took it. I got a lot of great experience from it for almost 10 or 11 months when I was there. Small agency, so it allowed me opportunities to work on big clients and with folks that knew what they were doing and took a chance with this newbie, fresh out of college. And it was a great experience.

Jeff Murphy:

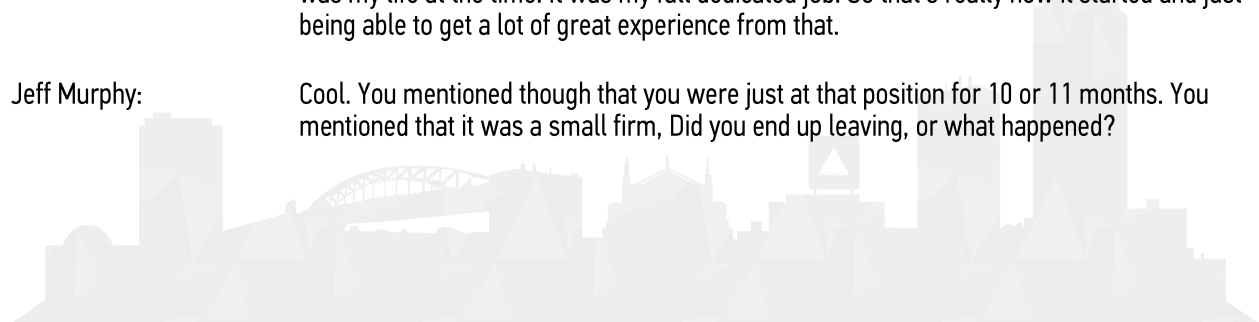
As a new grad, I'm curious to know if once you landed on sort of like the full-time job market, was it different in any way from the experiences you had as an intern? Were there sort of lessons you learned right away about being a young professional in New York City today?

Monique Kelley:

Yeah. First of all, I got lost every morning. I was like, where am I going on a subway? I lived in Astoria, Queens, where I actually lived for 12 years. I ended up staying there, so I started and then continued my career living in Astoria. And somehow four subway stops ended up being eight, six, ten. I was all over the place. So I continued to get lost and I just kept telling myself, just don't look lost and I'll be okay. I'll just fit in with everybody else. But I ended up, when I got to work, my experiences were such that it was so fast-paced. A lot of the work that I started to do was media monitoring for the top clients. 7:00 AM start, sometimes going until noon, very intense, very fast paced nature. So even though the internships I had, I got some of that, a lot of the internships tend to be two times a week. This was every day, this was in and out. It didn't matter if you were tired or cranky. You can't set your schedule the way that I did for the internships where it didn't interfere with school and with track. This was my life at the time. It was my full dedicated job. So that's really how it started and just being able to get a lot of great experience from that.

Jeff Murphy:

Cool. You mentioned though that you were just at that position for 10 or 11 months. You mentioned that it was a small firm, Did you end up leaving, or what happened?



Monique Kelley:

So it's interesting because in college you're always taught go to the small agencies to start because the small agencies you'll be able to do more. There's less red tape, less levels. And so I actually found in my career and I think my situation is unique, it really depends on the company and the experience. But I found that going to the larger agency, I had more of an opportunity because I was working on larger accounts. And I found in my career that the larger the account, the more people you're working with, and the more people you're working with the more you can learn and you can grow from them. And there's opportunities that if you're doing one project and you're not really feeling it, there are plenty of other projects within that same account team that you can work on. So I ended up moving to Manning Selvage and Lee in New York, at the time we were next to the Letterman building which was fun. So that was true New York, going right into Time Square and battling the folks on the street just to get to work half the time. But when I was at work, I started to really fall in love with the work that I was doing. I was hired specifically for my media relations skills, so I applied what I got from the last job here, but it was for healthcare department. And so full circle, again, somebody who failed biology who wasn't necessarily able to pursue her dream of nutrition, I had another shot at healthcare but in a different way on the communication side. So that ever since was really, it's what really started my love of healthcare PR, working with Pharma companies to really help for everything from awareness of different diseases and educating folks about the risk of certain things, getting information out about treatments and therapies of some grim diseases. So I was working in stage four cancer, working in Alzheimer's disease. Again, these areas where there were unmet needs, treatments were needed for people, and a lot of my job was being able to pitch stories for the people who had these diseases. So I would get really close to people who really leveraged me as an opportunity to tell their stories. And I took that very seriously because, unfortunately some of the people are no longer with us, but I remember thinking to myself that this is my calling. Even though, it's yes, Communications and I'm PR and we always say in PR, "we're not surgeons", although we are really doing our part to get information out to people who need it. And it's a really rewarding job and a great opportunity.

Jeff Murphy:

So pretty much out of the gate you sort of had to fall into this, I guess maybe I'm not asking the question correctly, but I know you've been working specifically in healthcare PR with pharmaceutical companies, bio-life sciences. Is that a thing? Where in PR, you kind of have to like pick a specialty and stick with it or is that sort of unusual that you've been working in that sort of one focus for a long time now?

Monique Kelley:

So really great question. We find for healthcare, especially when you're working on products for regulatory milestones, like the FDA and Health Canada, Ministry of Japan, there are so many nuances and healthcare PR, especially on the product communication side that we find that, One, it's rare to find people that have that skillset. So when you get that, whether their in house or agency, being able to really hone in and continue that specialty is going to be important, is going to make you valuable. I would say that for me, if you are someone who wants to be able to continue with a communications career but feels that you want to do something that's rewarding and that's benefiting people, not just people you don't know. I've had to unfortunately sometimes use this education that I have with quadruple bypasses, cancer, different multiple forms of cancer for my own family and being able to talk to cardiologists and oncologists and advocate for my family members. So it is truly a rewarding career that you can truly feel that you're helping people in need and getting the word out. But I would say if that's something that you want to do, the earlier you can get that skillset, the better it'll be for you in terms of being attractive to your employers.



Jeff Murphy: So tell us a little bit more about the path to how you landed in your current role at Weber Shandwick, and there are a couple of other agencies along the way. Along with the move back to Boston, can you sort of lay that out for us?

Monique Kelley: Absolutely. So I was with MSN for years, for at least five years. And I found in my career, it didn't really hit me until later, but I found that the power of BU is not only in the degree in the four years when you're here. The power of BU is the BU network that you will need during your time at BU, after when you're landing your first job or jobs. And then continuously, it's the gift that keeps on giving really for me, and for communications. The same way that I got that first job through my friend Corey, I ended up helping a fellow BU student, her name was Doris Lee, getting her first job at Emma Sandal. So we worked together on some counts and then she ended up moving onto another agency. And so when she was at that other agency, same thing, she lended her hand out and said, "Well, I think you would actually benefit from working here at Cohn and Wolfe." So Cohn and Wolfe at the time had two huge clients, Merck and GSK, and the work that they did was more consumer health versus a lot of the hard science and regulatory and data milestones work that I grew up in at MSNL. And so this was going to give me an opportunity to see a different side of healthcare PR and really round out my skill set. And so I ended up interviewing there and same thing that, I think really having somebody from the inside, a BU grad, who advocated for me to get that position really contributed to my being hired there. And so I was at Cohn and Wolfe for a couple of years. I worked on the GSK flu franchise business, I really liked the work that I was doing. Again, very rewarding. I remember when H1N1 broke out, I was the one monitoring and doing statements and crises and all kinds of fun things. I was flying back from vacation when I saw that, I think it was a Jet Blue flight so they had the TVs, and I saw that hit and I thought to myself, oh God, I'm going to be busy. But that's how it works in healthcare PR. You never know what's going to happen. I remember when I was there in addition to GSK, I worked a lot on new business. So Cohn and Wolfe felt really attractive about my background is that, I worked on a really prominent Alzheimer's medication for Aci and Pfizer and I worked a lot in the neurology space, so I was able to be sort of a neurology specialty area expert on new business pitches for Alzheimer's and other disease states, um, uh, to Salisbury, which is a biogen drug for multiple sclerosis. So different opportunities would come up that was specific to neurology and more and more I started to gravitate towards the new business side of things versus actually billable work. I remember actually when I was finalizing one of the budgets for work that we had just won and needed to get over to our new client. To kind of, you know, toast the new opportunity that we just won, the new partnership that we were going to kick off. My boss pulled me into her office and I thought, okay, what else do we need to do? Maybe he called and he wants more things in that budget. What's going on? And unfortunately I remember her saying that our budgets got cut and I didn't really necessarily know what that meant. I said, okay, the budgets got cut, but I'm finalizing one right now. Let's keep it moving. And so she clarified for me, no, unfortunately in agency life, sometimes when the budgets get cut and there were, we have too many people that unfortunately you're one of the people who are affected and we have to let go. And so I remember thinking to myself like, okay, and still I think being desensitized because I was so focused on my job, which was finalize the budget and kick off this work. And so when she asked me if I had questions, I said, well, just one, I want to make sure that this budget gets to the client prospect because that's what we promised him. I remember thinking, and after, after I left the office thinking to myself, you know, how could I perhaps have prevented this from happening?

Jeff Murphy: I was going to ask you, you just didn't see this coming at all?

Monique Kelley: Didn't see it coming at all. And I'm always one of these people, like, what can I do better? Again, always having accountability and feeling like I'm in control of this, so what can I do?

What should I have done, could I have done? Could I have talked to my manager more about this billability aspect and make sure that I was billable? Maybe there were other things and just a lot of different questions go through my head. But then I thought to myself, well, things happen for a reason. There was a reason why I ate those cookies in that hotel in Philly when BU people were recruiting me. There was a reason why I joined the track team, even though half of my career I was in the athletic trainer's room. There's a reason why I met my friend Caroline and she told me about PR, a reason why I met Kori and Doris who got me my first job. So I thought to myself, I don't know what reason it is for being laid off, but I hope it's going to not be a long time that I'm experiencing this because rents are expensive in New York and other things. So, Very interesting. My current job, which is at Weber Shandwick, when I was hired, it was in New York in 2010 and I remember Barb Box, who was the president at the time of the healthcare group. She's now North American Strategist, but I remember her telling me that we have a lot of people who were from Cohn and Wolfe, your former agency who work here. And in fact, they all tell me that you're really good with new business. So I thought, Oh God, I don't want to start off that way. And I remember her actually explaining to me that people, she has a theory that when people are really into new business that these are the people who aren't afraid of rejection, have tough skin, know how to jump, dive in, learn and understand a client's program in a week. And kind of the people who she felt are the kind of people that she's looking for to continue to build her practice. So I remember saying straight out, Barb sounds great, great opportunity, but I will never be more non-billable than billable again in my career. And that stuck with me. And so she was able to say, well, okay, we have an account. The budget's not officially approved yet. So understanding the situation you were just in with budgets, we tend to make sure that we hire when we have 100%, um, approval on a budget, not before. So do you mind waiting a few months? So that's what ended up happening. I stayed in touch with her and a couple months later I ended up working 100% billable. I should have been careful what I wished for because at that point I ended up even more than 100% in reality. But it was a great experience to work an account, a dynamic account with a lot of different pieces, but always still there was always this reserve of 10% where I would work on new business, sometimes just be brought in for the presentation. And I guess my animation versus the actual skill set, which was fun to me, that I was able to get that passion out but still feel protected in a way that was really focused on the billable side of our job.

Jeff Murphy:

So you've been at Weber Shandwick I think almost 10 years now and looking at your LinkedIn profile, I think you've been promoted twice. So it seems like it's been a great fit for you. And I know in that time you've been super engaged with COM and have come back. You mentioned being a guest lecturer for some of those professors you had back in the day. I'm curious to know what advice that you find yourself sharing with students who either in those classes with you or reach out to you outside of those classes, when they ask you about, "How do I break into this industry? How do I become a successful PR professional?" What are those two or three things that you always find yourself sharing with those folks?

Monique Kelley:

Yes. Well, number one, networking and leveraging the power of the network upfront. I spoke at this year's PRSSA conference in February, I remember it was freezing, but I spoke and my presentation was all around networking. And I stopped during the presentation, I did a poll, I did a live poll and the poll found that 75% of the attendees, so these were students from the region, PR students who were proactive enough in coming to this conference. But 75% of the students were afraid of networking. And I thought to myself, how? How are you guys afraid of networking when you're communications people who are here at this conference? And so I said, let's take five minutes, introduce yourselves to your neighbor because it's not about just networking with us old folks. It's about networking with each other. Because in my career the best opportunities that I ever was able to get and really cut through the clutter of different resumes was because I knew strong people, also BU grads

who were able to advocate and do my PR essentially to get these opportunities. These are people who are still my friends and we still speak with often. So I would say networking is number one and with each other, with your professors, and never feel that your time at BU is over because BU and the professors that are here and the network that you have from this university will carry you through job after job and opportunity after opportunity. You mentioned I came back and I do guest lecturing and I never thought of myself as a teacher or professor type, but I'm really liking it. And so I'm looking at potentially getting into adjuncting and other opportunities here that again, if you asked me, you know, 15 years ago when I graduated, would you want to be a teacher? I'd say absolutely not. And now here I am doing it in a different way. And the second advice I would say is there's going to be challenges. You could do everything right on paper. Your resume could look great, you could be an executive board member, have four internships, be on the track team, all kinds of things. Move to a different city, get your Craigslist roommate and make it work on a budget. But sometimes things are going to happen that are out of your control. And it's really about how you approach those challenges that makes the difference. You can approach them in a way that really defeats you, or you can approach them in a way that says, thank you, thank you for the challenges. Thank you for the opportunity to make me a stronger person and a stronger PR professional. And I think I've chose more and more to do the later because I've seen the benefits of positive attitude and being able to look at what potentially is a challenge. But now when I reflect back, I was really happy for that opportunity to be able to switch and work at Weber Shandwick, so I would've never potentially gotten that if it wasn't for what looked like a setback and my being laid off.

Jeff Murphy: Well those are both really, really great pieces of advice and I think it's a great place for us to sort of end our chat. But I know that you are somebody who is super interested in being available and helpful to others. If there are folks listening in that want to get in touch with you, what's a good way for them to do that?

Monique Kelley: Always LinkedIn. I live by LinkedIn. I love it and it's a great opportunity to network as well and find people who went to BU and don't be afraid to reach out to them, including myself. We're always willing to help.

Jeff Murphy: Monique it's really a treat to have you back on campus and thanks for carving out some time for us.

Monique Kelley: Thanks so much.

Jeff Murphy: My thanks once again to Monique for joining me on the podcast. I really appreciated her willingness to open up about the successes and challenges of her career and I think her advice on the importance of networking is totally spot on. As you heard, Monique is ready and willing to network with BU students and alumni, so be sure to connect directly with her on LinkedIn. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU podcast. Do you like what we're doing? Please be sure to subscribe, rate and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU podcast is produced by Boston University alumni relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, Visit [bu.edu/alumni/podcast](http://bu.edu/alumni/podcast).

