



Ep. 20: Michael DiSalvo (COM'09), Ogilvy PR Senior Vice President, Health & Wellness

Host: Dan Gardiner (Questrom'20), BU Alumni Relations

What does it mean for a company to emphasize people over profit? Michael DiSalvo (COM'09) is a self-proclaimed Ogilvy enthusiast having called the company his professional home for the last 9 years. In that time, Michael has quickly climbed the corporate "staircase" as he would call it to become the company's youngest Senior Vice President and was recently named one of PR Week's 40 under 40. Michael joined us on the podcast to explore his journey beyond BU, the importance of drinking the free coffee at the office and what he's learned about creating an authentic, positive, workplace culture.

Podcast Transcript:

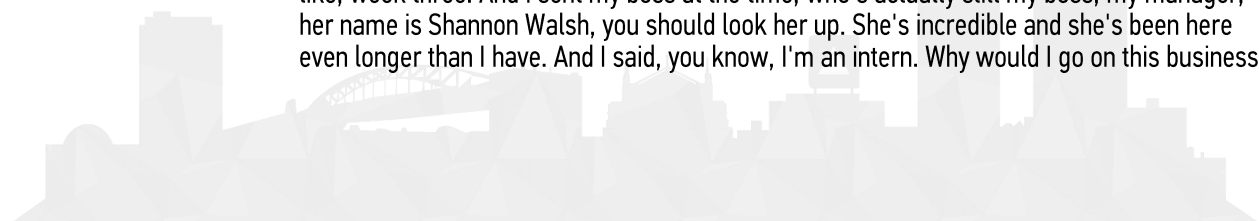
- Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations, and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast. Today, it's my distinct pleasure to welcome a special guest interviewer on Proud to BU, my colleague in the Alumni Relations office, Dan Gardiner. Dan, thanks for taking the lead on today's episode. The microphone is all yours.
- Dan Gardiner: Thanks for having me, Jeff. Today's guest is Michael DiSalvo, Senior Vice President at the world renowned PR Firm, Ogilvy. Michael graduated from the College of Communication in 2009. Since then, he's built his career at Ogilvy quickly rising up the ranks to become the company's youngest Senior Vice President. Michael and I spoke about his passion for PR, what he's learned from the ice cream man, and why making mistakes has been a crucial part of his success.
- Dan Gardiner: When you think back to your childhood, what did you want to be when you grew up, and were there any early warning signs that you might end up in a career in PR?
- Michael DiSalvo: I think calling them warning signs is probably the best way to describe them. What I wanted to do when I grew up, I wanted to be an ice cream man, to be honest, just because it seemed like such a fun job. And when you look at the correlation between what an ice cream man does and what a PR guy does, it's actually very similar. So when it comes to PR and advertising and marketing, you're really just delivering things to people that they should or want to know. And when it comes to ice cream, it's very much the same thing. I think that they're equally as fun, probably marketing is a bit less dangerous than sugar, but I don't want to put down the ice cream man industry as I respect them a ton. But when it comes to marketing, it's just about how you package things up. So I might say that ice cream men are the best marketers in the world, because it literally is a sound that a truck makes that sends people to a frenzy. I sprint for very few things, but I sprint when I hear the ice cream truck, so I don't think there's any marketer in the world that wouldn't kill for that type of reaction.

Dan Gardiner: When you think back to your time on Comm Ave while you were a student at BU working towards your degree in communication, do you think your former self would be surprised to see what you're doing for work now?

Michael DiSalvo: My former self would be floored if he saw what I was doing now. So when I was at BU, I was an English Education major through my junior year, and I was sitting in an Earth Science class with wonderful teacher, his first name was Sergio. And in the middle of class he clearly had a lot on his mind, he let out a sigh. And he just said, it doesn't seem like you guys are paying attention today. Why don't we end class and we'll pick it up next time. And everyone else got up and ran out of the class. And I sat there and I was like, if this man who's at the height of his profession at such a prestigious university is not excited about teaching today, I don't think I will ever be that excited. This man loves his job and I don't love education that much. And I literally walked out of SED and before they built the building in front of COM, when you look at across the street from SED, the first building you see is COM. And I walked across the street and I walked in and I literally went over to that lovely woman that sits at the desk over on the right side of the entrance, and I asked her, I said, do you have any pamphlets of what you do here? And she said, the sentence that changed my life. She said, "I'm sorry honey, we haven't had pamphlets since 1982." And then she set me up to talk to a COM guidance counselor. And then I took an Intro to PR class that was led by Professor Quigley who is still a prestigious member of the BU faculty. From there it just snowballed. I started taking internships, but even when I graduated, knowing I wanted to do PR, I never thought of doing healthcare PR. How that came about is, Professor Quigley said to me, "You have a year, and you need some internships". So I started taking any internship that I could get, and one of them was writing for something called the Parent Review, which was New England's second largest online-only pregnancy newsletter. I was like, okay, I'll get my writing chops together. I wrote for them for two weeks. I put it on my resume like any good student would. And then I got this internship at Ogilvy and they said, "oh, it's because you have such strong healthcare credentials". And I was racking my brain and I was like, healthcare? I haven't done healthcare ever. Then they said, "Yeah, that stint you had at this pregnancy newsletter is really impressive." And from there I just smiled, said, of course! I know so much about pregnancy, I know everything, those nine months of your life. And then I walked in the doors of Ogilvy taking a healthcare internship. And I've been here ever since. I've loved every single day of it.

Dan Gardiner: And that's something that I wanted to get into because you've spent nine years, the last nine years, at the same company. And I think for a lot of folks out there who are listening, that's going to be pretty rare. That's unusual to stay with one company for so long. So what was it, maybe during your internship or the first couple of years that you were working there, what was it about Ogilvy as a company that assured you that this was the right place for you to grow?

Michael DiSalvo: There are a lot of reasons and most of them have less to do with Ogilvy, more to do with cultural fit and replicable across any industry, any company. And it's all about momentum or runway, how much runway you have left. And at Ogilvy, no matter what my title was, no matter what account I was on, no matter what I was doing, I always felt like I had so much more to gain. And that's because the halls of Ogilvy are filled with brilliant people, and because I've always had great mentors that looked out for me. So I always felt like I had more skills to learn or always felt like I had more work to accomplish. And because I felt like I had people behind me, my projects were always far exceeding what I thought my level was. I was always feeling challenged. When I was an intern, they sent me on a business trip like, week three. And I sent my boss at the time, who's actually still my boss, my manager, her name is Shannon Walsh, you should look her up. She's incredible and she's been here even longer than I have. And I said, you know, I'm an intern. Why would I go on this business

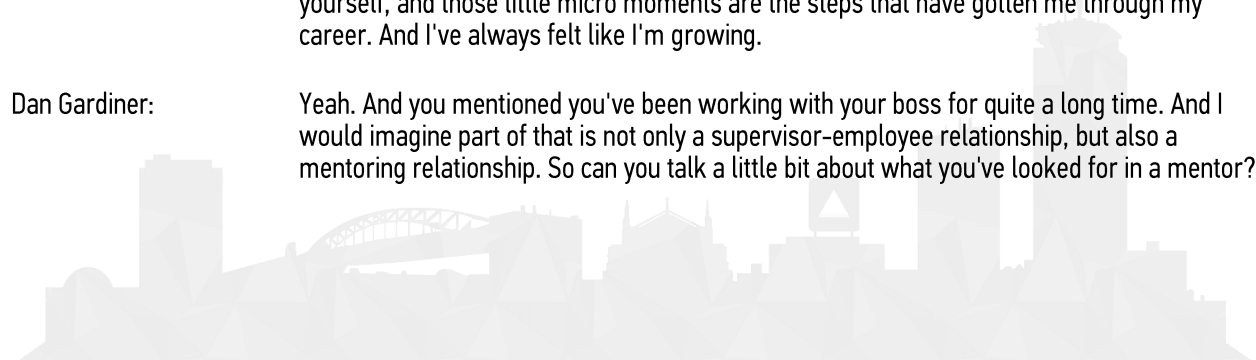


trip? She was like, "You've proven yourself. You really earned your spot". And that idea of proving yourself and earning your spot, is something that's always stuck with me. And I think that seeing Ogilvy invest in me so early on really changed the way that I work with other people, and the reasons that I look to stay at a company. I sat my manager down. Wait, I didn't sit my manager down, they sat me down early on in my career and they said, "If you're ever not doing okay, just let me know". And I said, if I ever stop having fun here, I won't come back. Like the day I stop having fun is the day I walk out the door, and I've never gotten to that point. I think that work should be challenging, but it should be fun first and you should enjoy it as much as you can. And there were very few days in my life where I wake up not thinking I'm going to have fun at work.

Dan Gardiner: I think a lot of us, we're really wondering, how did you get there? What are the landmarks that you can identify between intern and Senior Vice President that stand out as pivotal moments in your career so far?

Michael DiSalvo: It's funny that you said one of the landmarks, because when you first picture your career or when you think about your parents' career, you think about this steady line. Like just a straight diagonal line up, it's just a constant rise and you're always learning and always gaining. And it's not. It looks like a staircase. There are these moments that you feel you stretch and grow, and then there are these plateaus. And then something happens that really kicks you off and you start learning a little bit. There is an incredible video online, and I can't believe I'm citing this on a podcast. It's an older rabbi, and I don't often watch rabbi speeches, it's not a pastime of mine, that talks about how a lobster grows. They grow when they outgrow their shells and it's because of this discomfort that they have and when they start to feel uncomfortable in the shell that they have, they shed it because it's hurting them too much and they find a bigger shell. And that's what your career is like. It's these moments of challenge or discomfort that it starts to become a bit uncomfortable for you and then you shed the role you're in, and grab a new one. And Ogilvy has created those moments for me, whether I liked them or not, whether it's being on a new business pitch, whether it's being on a particularly challenging client, whether it is working on a project that I have no knowledge, and it's all the faith that they put in me to do it. One perfect example that really renewed my faith in the company is I was working on a particularly challenging client and I said, I'm having a real rough time with this client and they provided me all the resources that I need to fix it. And I said to them, I've tried everything here and I just don't think we're going to be able to give the client what they want, obviously in more emotional words and colorful words that I'm using now. They went and they let the client go and for an agency to step away from a client because of the impact it was having on the team that was working on it, it was something I've never seen. I never saw it before. I never saw it again. And I again asked him, I said, you know, why'd you do that? And they said, "because of your opinion and how much we value you. We would much rather have you here than have this client that was dragging down some of our best people". And that blew me away. And it was such a renewed sense of the commitment that the company had. And it really showed me the type of place that that Ogilvy is. That it is a place that emphasizes people over profit and to work for a company that considers itself to be a teaching hospital, or the Grey's Anatomy of the marketing world. And maybe I'm not a McDreamy, but certainly we have the best surgeons in the industry, and then they can take their time to teach you how to be one yourself, and those little micro moments are the steps that have gotten me through my career. And I've always felt like I'm growing.

Dan Gardiner: Yeah. And you mentioned you've been working with your boss for quite a long time. And I would imagine part of that is not only a supervisor-employee relationship, but also a mentoring relationship. So can you talk a little bit about what you've looked for in a mentor?



Did you identify any during your time at BU, and then how have you found them outside of the academic world?

Michael DiSalvo:

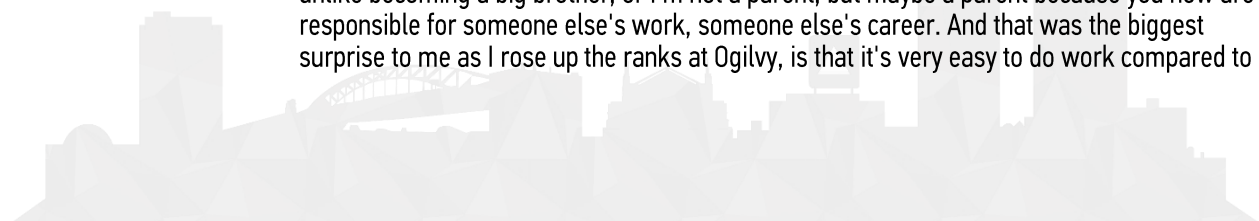
Absolutely. I always get asked about mentors and networking, and they seem like unattainable things and they are both made up constructs. Mentors are not preordained. The best mentors in your life are the ones that won't be appointed. And for me, I've found a ton of mentors, and I don't recognize that until afterwards. They're friends first and then they become mentors in hindsight. And it could be anyone. For me, my older brothers were mentors because they entered the professional world before I did. At BU, Professor Quigley and Professor Downes were mentors while I was there, because they had been where I wanted to go, and I didn't realize that at the time because they were just professors. And then they became something a bit more than that because they always kept in touch. And then when I entered the professional world, it was just someone that would always take time. They would always take time to answer questions and then all of a sudden you realize you're not talking about work anymore in the tactical sense. You're not talking about what's on your to do list, but you're talking about your trajectory. You're talking about where their path took them and how yours is different. And it happens very naturally, all you have to do is open yourself up and let your walls down. When I started working here, I said there's going to be work-Michael and there's going to be play-Michael, and play-Michael is never going to interact with work-Michael, and work people are never going to see play-Michael because he's so much cooler. And then I started coming in every day and started making jokes, started hanging out with people, and then what I saw happen that I was afraid that work-Michael would take over play-Michael's life. But what actually happened is play-Michael started showing up to the office every once in awhile. And then play-Michael, people really like play-Michael. And then I stopped being who I thought I should be and started being who I actually was. And when that happened and my coworkers started becoming my friends, and then my bosses started becoming these mentors, it changed perspective. Work-life balance does not mean black and white. It does not mean I come in at 9 and I leave at 5. Work-life balance means that my work is integrated into my life because it's such a big percentage of what I do, and that they are interchangeable. It's not two people, but it's one person that just does a lot of different things. And that changed the way that I looked at my mentors or my friends.

Dan Gardiner:

I'm struck by the work-life balance and thinking about what you thought you should be as compared to the way in which you're actually living out this role. So I'm wondering if you could tell us what your current title means to you? What does it mean to be at Senior Vice President? And is it different from what outsiders might think?

Michael DiSalvo:

I'm sure that it is very different, and I might be a bit of an anomaly in the fact that my titles never meant all that much to me as much as the responsibility and the place that I had. The way that I look at it is, when you think back to your high school, when you think of the Valedictorian, that spoke at your graduation. Before graduation, he wasn't the Valedictorian or she wasn't the Valedictorian, but they always were at some point, they were seen as being either gregarious, or really intelligent. Everyone always knew that that person had that in them. It was only after either a vote or GPA contest, whatever the criteria were that that person became, got the title of a Valedictorian, but he always knew what their position was. And at work it's very similar. Whether you are given a title of Senior Vice President or given a title of Account Executive, your position in the company is what you make it. And that comes from always raising your hand, getting involved in cultural committees. So for me, the only title that really mattered to me was becoming someone's manager because it's not unlike becoming a big brother, or I'm not a parent, but maybe a parent because you now are responsible for someone else's work, someone else's career. And that was the biggest surprise to me as I rose up the ranks at Ogilvy, is that it's very easy to do work compared to



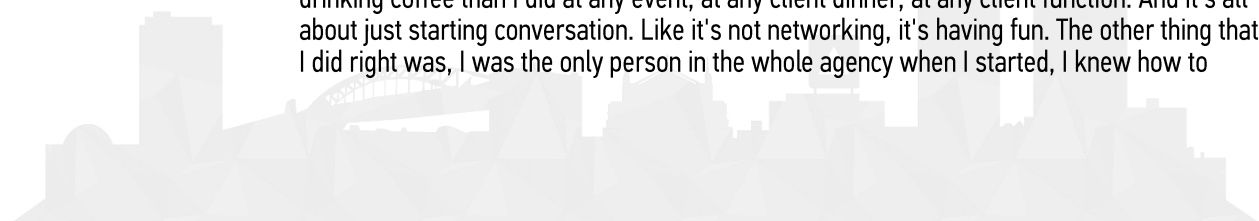
how difficult it is to inspire others to do work. And we all have horror stories from group projects in college of that person, that one person that didn't pull their weight or that person that disappeared. And those dynamics exist in the real world, except you can't give up on them. You can't just do all the work yourself because the team will fall apart. And that's been a tough lesson for me. But it's also really exciting to be surrounded by people that are so smart and to get the most out of people. And frankly, I've been shocked how much I've learned from people that aren't my managers or aren't my supervisors that come out of college and teach me stuff every day.

Dan Gardiner: And when you talk about culture within the workplace and now you're in a position where you can really influence the culture, can you tell me a little bit about how you think about workplace culture? What does that mean?

Michael DiSalvo: This is a bit of a cop out answer, but if you're on the interview and they start telling you how great their culture is, they start telling you, "we have a bar in the building". Every agency has a bar in the building. It's not a selling point. "We have ping pong tables". Every agency has ping pong tables. It's a caricature at this point. Then chances are their culture is something that they're trying to buy instead of something that is implicit. For me, my story, I went on a ton of interviews before I started working at Ogilvy, and every in interview I said the right things, I talked about my experience, I answered the question. I was the perfect PR guy, and every interview I took my flip phone out and I called my then-girlfriend and I said, I nailed it. Coming home, hon. Got that job, going out to dinner, and I never heard back. And then I went on this interview with Ogilvy and the whole interview, cracking jokes, we were laughing, they didn't ask me about my experience, they didn't harp on the questions of what I knew about social media guidance, and I walked out, took out that same flip phone called my girlfriend, and then I said, I got to go home and I got to apply to more jobs. They didn't me any of the questions. They were laughing at me, and by the time I got home I had a voicemail because I frankly fell asleep on the train from Ogilvy HR offering me the job. And that's when it clicked for me that it's, your resume will get you in the door, but it's that relationship and that feeling that will get you the job and you should want to work at a company as much as they want you to work there. When I left my interview for Ogilvy, I desperately wanted to be friends with the people that I met and it felt right and that's the cultural fit. It's if it feels right. You will sit with these people for 60 hours a week, some weeks. That is an insane amount of time to be around any single human being. Do you know how much you have to like someone to spend 60 hours with them? It's like going on a Tinder date. Like if you can't get through two hours with them, how can you get through your whole life?

Dan Gardiner: And in keeping with the advice for folks who are just starting out, what do you think you did right in terms of establishing yourself in those first six months, first year, and now, from your perspective as a Senior Vice President, what would you say people really need to do when they are just starting out to really make an impact and leave an impression on the folks that are reporting to?

Michael DiSalvo: If you asked me this question nine years ago, I would've said nothing right. In hindsight, the one thing, there's two things actually that I think I did right. And they're both very simple. The first is I drank a lot of coffee and I'm not talking about keeping myself up at night. In the kitchen, and I've noticed that the people that drink the free coffee are either the people that aren't making enough money to buy coffee, or the people who have been at the agency long enough that they remember when the coffee was good. And I met more senior people drinking coffee than I did at any event, at any client dinner, at any client function. And it's all about just starting conversation. Like it's not networking, it's having fun. The other thing that I did right was, I was the only person in the whole agency when I started, I knew how to



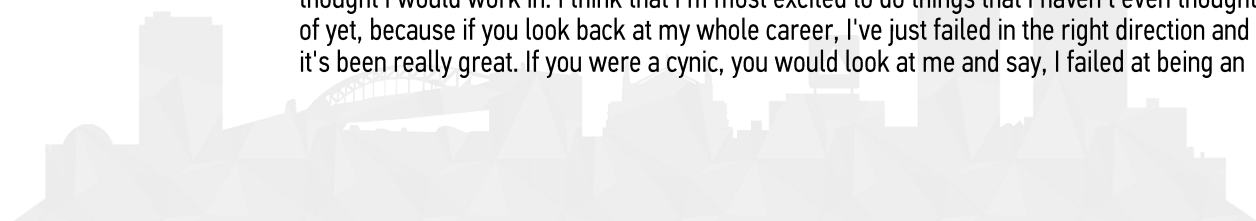
hook the laptop up to the TV screen in one of the conference rooms. So, when I was an intern, I knew how to do that and then my manager saw me do it. So then the former CEO of Ogilvy PR had a big meeting and he was in the meeting with one of my managers and they couldn't hook the computer up to the TV. So they said, "oh, go get Michael the intern. He knows how to do it". And then all of a sudden, fast forward two hours later, the CEO's coming over to thank me for helping him out. So the moral of the story is just put yourself out there.

Dan Gardiner: Can you talk a little bit about any mistakes or missteps along the way, and what did you learn?

Michael DiSalvo: There are a thousand mistakes and I've learned from each and every one of them. But the main lesson to take away from all the mistakes that I've made, and hopefully everyone here can listen and hear all of the mistakes, is that it's okay to make mistakes and that you will learn more from one failure than you will from a thousand successes because you will never do it again. It's kind of like, everyone has that one alcohol or liquor they'll never drink again because they got super sick that one time. That's what making a mistake at work is like. You'll never do it again. But if you do something right a thousand times, there's always the chance you'll do it wrong. And once you shed that fear and you move forward thinking that it's okay to make mistakes, then you'll find success almost everywhere you go. Sometimes I embark on things, assuming that there'll be terrible ideas just because there's a chance that it won't be and if it isn't, then it will be extraordinary. We've launched campaigns in six weeks and five weeks in health care, which is incredible. People have made asks of us that others have said were impossible to turn around and we proceeded saying, you know what? This might not work, but if it does it's going to be extraordinary. And that's the type of, I guess, fearlessness that you need to have. That said, you won't get there without so much fear. I think that anxiety is the single greatest thing that you could bring to work and that's because it's a sign of seriousness. I take this job seriously, I take my life seriously and that's what we want from people. We want someone who's fun and we want someone that wants to be around us. But you also want someone where this means something to me because it means something to everyone. And when you have that one person in the group project that doesn't care and doesn't need to be there and has a job lined up and you started thinking like, okay, well just because you don't want to do this, like this matters to me. When you get into the work world and you want to be surrounded by people that take it seriously, but who are dumb enough to say, I don't care about the risks.

Dan Gardiner: Yeah. I want it to end asking you to talk about the runway that you still see before you. When you look 5, 10 years out, what are the things that you hope to accomplish and more importantly, what will it take to get you there?

Michael DiSalvo: I am very excited for the future because Ogilvy taken a lot of really cool steps to get there. So recently, Ogilvy worked to tear down the walls between PR and advertising and e-commerce, all the different facets of marketing. So for me, as somebody who came up through PR, it opened up a world to me of being able to take a lot of the skills and the strategies that I learned at BU and spanned and find how integrated marketing works. So we're approaching things just with a different lens. We used to have clients come to us and say, "we have this issue, we want this PR solution," and now we have clients coming to us to say, "we have this problem and we don't know how to fix it. Can you help us?" And the tools aren't just PR. They're not just advertising. It's how do we get the best out of this problem to be able to have access to that, to work in the world of marketing that I never thought I would work in. I think that I'm most excited to do things that I haven't even thought of yet, because if you look back at my whole career, I've just failed in the right direction and it's been really great. If you were a cynic, you would look at me and say, I failed at being an



English teacher and I jumped ship. And then, I graduated BU and I failed to get the jobs that I intended, and I took an internship post-grad, which everyone would probably scoff at and say, "why would you take an internship?". And then I failed to get a job in consumer PR and do red carpets for Coke. And then I just continued to fail from what I thought I was supposed to do. And if I kept my original goal, and became an English teacher. If you're evaluating junior year, Michael in SED at BU, he's failed miserably at what he set out to do. So I'm really excited to continue to fail at what I think I'm going to do and do something entirely different. And I'm lucky enough that Ogilvy and BU before it has provided me with the tools and the opportunities to do so and to figure out what I'm going to fail at next.

Dan Gardiner: Well, I can assure you all of us at BU and the Alumni Association are very excited to see what you'll be failing at next. And we're so grateful that you took the time today to talk to us on the podcast and we are rooting for you every step of the way.

Michael DiSalvo: Thank you so much. I can't say enough as to what COM and the alumni network has done for me personally, gave me a ton of friends. Also for any students that are listening who are in PR, you should be a part of the PRSSA that is set up through COM, because it's an incredible chapter and they do awesome stuff. And P.S., a ton of Ogilvy's interns come from BU and come from PRSSA directly. So it's a quick little entry point into the world. Thank you so much for having me. It's been awesome.

Dan Gardiner: All right. Well, thank you again, Michael. We appreciate your time.

Michael DiSalvo: All right, talk to you all soon.

Dan Gardiner: My thanks once again to Michael for joining me on the podcast. It's really great to hear his story and I hope we can all find the fulfillment that he's found in his role at Ogilvy. I'd certainly encourage you to read the PR week profile of Michael in their 2018 40 under 40 series, and if you'd like, you can connect directly with him on LinkedIn.

Jeff Murphy: Great job, Dan, and thanks to all of you for listening to the Proud to BU podcast. If 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.

