

## Carrie Braun- Personal Essay

Feet firmly planted, I peered over razor wire down six stories to concrete. The night before, three inmates escaped from the county jail, rappelling from that exact spot with rope made of braided jail bedsheets. As part of the Public Affairs team for the county sheriff's department that oversees the jail, I brought media to the jail's roof to explain the complex escape plan of three inmates. Every communication skill and media relationship I'd built would be tested during the subsequent eight-day manhunt; the incident would permanently alter the trajectory of my career. This experience reaffirmed lessons I'd previously learned -- the importance of taking risks and being open-minded has shaped my evolving career goals.

Taking risks is not my inclination. Fresh-faced and bright-eyed under the bill of my college graduation cap, I thought my career was planned and my path clear. Before graduation, I interviewed for a coveted entry-level position at a prestigious public relations firm and a few weeks later was offered the job. Instead of excitement, my stomach was in knots. During my last semester of college, I'd interned at a local cable company on the public affairs team. I enjoyed the internship far more than expected. The cable company was expanding its public affairs team and planned to add an entry-level position, but the position needed to be approved and no promise was made that I would be hired. The public relations firm that first offered to hire me needed an immediate answer. I can still feel the hot blinding brightness on the day I paced outdoors when I declined the public relations firm's offer. It was a huge risk, one that paid off a few weeks later when the cable company offered me the job.

If learning to take risks was a big step, being open minded to new career possibilities was a full-fledged leap. I'd grown up with parents who had 70 years of school district tenure between them. I assumed that my career would follow a similar route of dedication and long-term service. Entering the corporate world, I learned that their experience was an anomaly in today's culture. After college graduation, I enjoyed seven years working in public affairs at a local cable company. I was unexpectedly called by the local Sheriff's Department regarding a position a former colleague recommended me for. While flattered, I had no interest or knowledge about police departments. Little did I know how much I would learn and how intrigued I'd be at the new opportunity. By being open minded, I made the leap from corporate to government and found a position that I truly love.

Taking risks and being open minded proved to be a vital duo throughout my time at the sheriff's department. During the jail escape, the communication strategy involved calculated risks and keeping an open mind to new ways of communicating. Our team brought the media to the roof of the jail to interview the sheriff and see first-hand where the escape occurred. We released crime scene photos that showed the elaborate nature of the escape plan. Throughout the eight-day manhunt, we trailed breadcrumbs of information for the media to keep them engaged in the story. When the inmates were brought safely back into custody, our local paper of record highlighted the department's innovative communication strategies and use of social media in a front-page feature.

A few months later, I was asked to present on our communication strategies and lessons learned during the jail escape to a communication class at a local university. These presentations sparked my interest to learn more about becoming a professor. Research then led me to apply to a specialized master's program with a teaching emphasis at Gonzaga University.

As a communication scholar and professional, I have continued to rely on these lessons to propel forward to graduation. Enrolling in a master's program while maintaining a demanding full-time job, a family with three school-aged children, and various volunteer commitments was one of the biggest risks of my life. I have continually practiced open mindedness in adjusting my schedule and obligations to accommodate the time needed to excel as a communication scholar. Now nearing graduation, the knowledge, skills, and experience gained in combination with taking risks and being open minded provide me the opportunity to actualize my evolved career goal of becoming a full-time communication professor.