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Public Relations Interview – Merritt Croom

On Monday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, at 3:00 p.m., I sat down in Merritt Croom's cubicle on the third floor of Rock Hill City Hall to chat with her about her career and what has led her to where she is today. Sporting a casual vest with the Rock Hill Parks, Recreation and Tourism logo on the chest, she casually leaned across her vibrating iPhone and closed laptop to answer my questions. Without wasting any time, I turned on my recorder (with her permission) and jumped right in.

**Q:** *Just to begin, would you please state your name and official title?*

**A:** My name is Merritt Croom, and I am the Corporate Relations and Sponsorship Coordinator for the Rock Hill Parks Foundation, which is the non-profit sliver of the Rock Hill Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department.

**Q:** *And how long have you been in this position?*

**A:** Ten years.

**Q:** *Tell me a little about your college career. What school(s) did you attend?*

**A:** Well, I started at the College of Charleston, and then I transferred to the University of South Carolina to continue. My junior year, life circumstances took me out to El Paso, Texas. So I finished at the University of Texas El Paso, where the John Hancock Bowl is. But because of my bee-bopping around, and of course moving out of state as a junior, I finished in four years when I could have finished early. But I promised my mama I'd get my college degree. I was always going to be in some type of marketing communications and/or graphic design, and I ended up graduating with a double major in Marketing Communications and Graphic Design and double minor in English and Painting.

**Q:** *Painting, that's interesting. Did you paint a lot growing up?*

**A:** [smiles] Yep. I will probably paint again once we get the third one out of the house. I did for a while when we moved back to South Carolina, but you just can't make any money out of it.

**Q:** *So, you graduated from college in Texas, and then what?*

**A:** Yeah, I graduated from school, got married, and had the first of two boys, then moved to Chicago. I was creative director for a big firm up there. And then, when I was expecting our third son, I basically looked at my husband and said, “I don’t care where it is, but we are moving back to the southeast between Raleigh and Atlanta.” [laughs] All of our family is down here.

**Q:** *Is there anything else you’d like to add concerning your background and how you’ve traveled from all those places back to Rock Hill?*

**A:** Well, my first job right out of college was working for a newspaper in El Paso, Texas. That was around the time that web design started to become a thing, and I was able to dabble in that for a little while. At my job in Chicago, I was able to do marketing and PR for Blockbuster and Intel; we actually helped develop micro data for their intranets. Probably the most entertaining events I got to do in Chicago was when we did an incentive party for all the employees who had reached a certain level, and they had it at the House of Blues.

**Q:** *So how did you end up back here in Rock Hill?*

**A:** Well, I wanted to move back here while my kids were still little. But this job sort of didn’t really exist before me. I actually interned for the marketing coordinator position over the entire department. That position opened when the boys were getting ready to go to school that year, and I was ready to go back to work and not be at home anymore. When we interviewed, it was my understanding that they [Rock Hill Parks, Recreation and Tourism] had just opened up a fund for the Foundation for the Carolinas. They were trying to offset any monies that were not in the budget; they had to find some way to produce additional funding to build and support initiatives that this department had. Well, they had two families who wanted a soccer complex in Rock Hill (this was before Manchester Meadows), and they each ponied up \$75,000 to get that [soccer complex] going. So while they [PRT] knew they needed an individual that would handle the foundation component of this department, they weren’t ready to hire that person yet. They wanted to wait another eighteen months because they didn’t have a logo, or a mission statement, or a vision; all they had were two gifts in a fund in Charlotte. That’s it. So when I interviewed for that position, it just became apparent that I was perfect for that position. One, I was born and raised here, and I had a lot of contacts. And two, I was already very involved in the community from a volunteer side; I sat on a lot of different boards and was very participatory. So, I designed the logo, and I designed the letterhead and business cards, all of it; it’s kind of been my baby. And we have evolved a great deal in ten years.

**Q:** *What does your typical workday look like from start to finish?*

**A:** It is never the same. With the exceptions of staff meetings, Boy and Girls Club meetings, Kiwanas meetings, and all that, if we are not working on a special event, then I'm typically in here [looks at cubicle] from 9:30am to 4:30pm. Right now I'm working on press releases... We're getting ready to form an "Ask" for Natures and Navigators, which is a year-round educational program for local youth. Our first "Ask" was so successful, that instead of raising \$750, we raised \$7,500. So now, we're trying to take it to the \$10,000+ mark and get it endowed. We're just trying to tweak what we did last year. For the top donors, we're going to include a handwritten note and a few pictures to show them some smiling faces, diversity...we have to plan the whole thing out for it to be a kind of a "heart-string" program. But we never imagined it would have this type of success.

**Q:** *Do you find you have to balance advocacy and objectivity frequently in this position?*

**A:** Totally. I have to be careful whenever I sit on a board that I represent because on occasion I have to recuse myself. For example, I sit on the York County Community Foundation board, and they will have their grant cycle in April. Well, the Rock Hill Parks Foundation has applied for one of those grants. So when they vote on that one, I cannot participate in the vote. I always have to be mindful of whether I'm speaking on behalf of an agency I represent, on behalf of myself as a community member, on behalf of myself as a mom, or on behalf of myself as a PRT person. For example, they [PRT] ask us not to voice our political opinion within the press. Also, I have to be very careful with how my sponsors are represented and acknowledged.

**Q:** *Given that it is hot topic in the media and pop culture right now, I feel like I have to ask: how is it being a woman in this industry?*

**A:** You know, in communications or development, these positions are mostly held by females. So I think it comes down to how you want to represent yourself. I very much could be considered kind of "bitchy" at times to some people, but I think I'm just very clear and concise. For meetings, for example, I was the chair for the York County Community Foundation two years ago, and the former chair would let the meetings consistently go over time. I think it's important to respect people's time, so my claim to fame was that my meeting never went longer than an hour. I think my record was thirty-eight minutes. [laughs] When the next chair came in after me, who was a man, he made it very clear that he was going to uphold my meeting style. So I try not to focus necessarily on the fact that I'm a female and try to focus on how I would act in whatever the moment is. But then again, because you do that, there will be moments where you might get called out as being maybe embrative, even when that might not necessarily be the case. And yes, [laughs] I've had that happen to me several times. [laughs]

**Q:** *Would you consider yourself fairly active and present on social media? What are some primary media outlets you enjoy following on a daily basis?*

**A:** Oh yeah. Well, for me, in development, my whole world is about relationships. So, I find out who's had a baby, who's getting married, who's died, who's sick, all on social media. I manage the York County Community Foundation's Facebook page and the Kiwanas Facebook page and Twitter. Just this morning, I've posted about needing more volunteers for the barbeque, about the read-a-thon, and about Kiwanas updates, all through Facebook. Whenever people "check-in," I try to make sure it's not [for example] "The Trail at Riverwalk;" instead, I put on Foursquare that it's the "Piedmont Medical Center Trail at Riverwalk." So I'm trying to correct the perceptions out there; I'm conscious of branding for our sponsors. Personally, I'm a "news junky," but there are a few philanthropic accounts that I try to follow as well.

**Q:** *What's been a major PR crisis you've had to deal with since taking this position?*

**A:** Oh, we have all kinds of examples. At Santa in the Garden at the Rock Hill Galleria, after six years, there were some changes in staff. The individual who was in charge, whom had worked closely with me on this event in previous years, had an assistant who then moved into her position. Well, in the eleventh hour, when I was trying to finalize the brochure, the new staff member emailed me and said, "Oh, we're not going to do that [event] this year." So we had to scramble, in the eleventh hour, to find a Santa Claus. Do you realize that Santa Claus is usually booked out by May? Well, we eventually found someone who came in and saved us, but it was very frustrating and difficult. Another example could be around the fact that we are a political arena. We have a certain hierarchy in place. We have not only paid city management staff but also elected officials, and sometimes our elected officials or our hierarchy might misrepresent something to the press. It might not necessarily be on purpose, but they might mess up. Misrepresentation in the press is probably one of the tougher issues with which we have to deal. And when external media wants to try to find a story that's not there, we have to handle that as well, all while keeping our personal opinions in check. I mean, if I could write an editorial whenever I would like, I probably wouldn't still be employed.

**Q:** *On the flip side, what's an aspect to the job that you find most fulfilling?*

**A:** It is never boring. I am never doing the same thing. I never sit at my desk nine to five, seven days a week. I get to meet lots and lots of different people; we have lots of different kinds of activities that we're involved in that really do make it interesting. And then, to see how much Rock Hill has really grown and the impact it's had on the community is unbelievable. Did you know that tourism is the number one industry in Rock Hill? The impact that all these individuals are bringing to this community is just

mind-boggling. The facilities that have come to Rock Hill are tremendous, and to hear people talk about what we do and how much they appreciate it is very rewarding.

**Q:** *With the Come See Me Festival just around the corner, how does that huge event affect you?*

**A:** I mean all of PRT is involved in Come See Me, but we still have all our other sports activities that run regularly. I'm a Come See Me team leader, so I sit in on that board. My particular interest is in the Community Service Merit Awards. That process is done in the fall, and then they're chosen and announced at the Come See Me breakfast that was actually held just last month. The last thing that I have to do is on Thursday night at the parade; I have to handle their parade float. I'll also be responsible for the city's hospitality tent. We'll make sure that both Friday night and Saturday night there's food, drink, and pretty table cloths, and we'll handle their parking passes, wristbands, hospitality packets, and invitations.

**Q:** *How would your 21-year-old-self feel about where you're at today, professionally?*

**A:** [pauses as she looks up to the ceiling thoughtfully] I think okay. I had a little bit of a different skew at that age. I think at twenty-one, you're a little bit more idealistic and maybe have a grander idea of how much a dollar is. I should have owned my own art gallery by now and be living and painting down in Charleston. But you may or may not get married, you may or may not have a relationship, and you may or may not have children; and so, when all that comes into play, things change ... painting doesn't come with full time benefits. [laughs] Health insurance, dental insurance, 401k, sick leave, a retirement plan...all those things will become important to you, and so you'll make different choices to go for those kinds of things.

**Q:** *In closing, what advice would you give me, or any other young person entering into this industry, pertaining to PR, the travel & tourism industry, and internships?*

**A:** To be really open. It's easier to find a job when you have a job. And sometimes you just need to get your foot in the door. So don't be afraid to start one position and not like it, and then go somewhere else. Network. Talk to everybody. Even go talk to people you know who might not be able to give you a job. I would say 85% of the jobs people get aren't advertised; they're under the radar.

**Q:** *I think that's it. Thank you for your time today, Merritt. Are there any other additional comments you'd like to make?*

**A:** No, I don't think so. Thank you, Bridgette. We're looking forward to having you intern with us this summer.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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