

**2019 ACE Annual Conference
ACE Professional Award Presentation
Mary Wirth, Director of College Relations and Communications
Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences**

First, I want to thank Suzanne for nominating me. You are an incredible colleague and incredible friend. Thank you! Thank you to the board of directors for supporting that nomination, and to my boss Dean Rick Roush and my past boss, Bruce McPheron, who is now Provost at Ohio State, for submitting letters of support. I am very humbled by this award.

My path into Communications was likely unlike many of yours. I did not choose communications as my career, it chose me. And I want to take just a moment to share with you a bit about my journey in communications, because it might make you think a little differently about yours.

To me, communications was not a profession, it was a tool. An incredibly powerful tool, strategic tool, and it is even more so in today's world. I used communications to advance my passions, and those passions drove my career in communications.

I married a forester 40 years ago this past Sunday. Jon is here today. He is one of those people I envy because he who knew from a very young age exactly what he wanted to be when he grew up. His grandfather was a forester, who by the way worked for Extension, and from a child he had a great passion and knowledge for all things in the woods. And still does. It is the core of who he is as a person.

I won't go into the details on how that changed my life, other than to say, he moved me to a remote community of 4000 people surrounded by the Allegheny National Forest in NW Pa. If you ever saw the TV show Northern Exposure, that is Kane, Pa! It is a timber town. A wonderful community.

The Forest products industry was about 20 years ahead of agriculture in facing radical, and at that time violent, what I will call "anti" groups. To see my husband, my community, my family, and our friends - these hard working, decent people who contribute greatly to the well-being of our society, being vilified and threatened for their profession, made me angry. I had been well-educated on the science of forestry and was very comfortable defending these professionals.

Some of these groups were really out there. One I remember solely for the name was, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement - I kid you not. My advice to them was you guys just lead the way, and we will all follow!

I had great passion for this cause - this was about our family, our livelihood and our community. and my chosen tool to engage in this debate was strategic communications. Strategic messaging, storytelling, motivating, debating, and lobbying. It was all about education and persuasion, but what made those tools effective for me was my passion and strategy. A primary target audience for me were federal legislators, and it is in Washington DC where I learned the world is run by those who show up. So, I showed up, and I made a difference - through strategic communications.

Anyway, I found I had some talent in this area and my almost 30-year career in public relations, Government relations, and strategic communications was born.

When I took the job in the College of Ag Sciences at Penn State as the Director of College Relations, I was bit skeptical. I took it because, once again, I would be able to work with and represent the agricultural industry in Pennsylvania. People I had worked with in my previous job that are served by our college and extension, and advocate for them in the legislature.

But again, I took the job due to my passion for those working in agriculture - I have incredible respect for the job they do – it is hard - and I love telling their story. It amazes we eat. And once again I got to advocate for them in legislature, where I share who we are, what we do, and why we matter - to persuade them to fund us.

As I noted, I did not see myself as a professional communicator. So, when my boss back then, about 13 years ago - asked me to take on the Ag Communications Unit in the college, which at the time was part of IT, I balked. Mainly because I knew digital communications were critical, and I did not feel I had the "IT" skills to manage the web group. But he persuaded me to do it, and I took the risk, because he saw something in me I did not. Although it was incredibly challenging, and very scary, very soon after I realized the incredible opportunity we now had to make a huge difference for the college and extension through communications. Communications is an incredibly powerful tool!

And when you combine passion and communications with strategy, you move the needle for whatever your passion or job is.

Working with industry and the legislators - our funders - I knew Extension needed to modernize or it would not survive. So, we decided we had nothing to lose, and we decided to think big. We put together and pitched to college leadership a strategy to do just that - create tools - an infrastructure to support Extension in the 21st Century. We called the strategy Atlas. It did not change the mission of what Extension does - but it does change the way in which we can deliver on that mission, provide education and communicate with our customers in today's world.

As you can imagine, this was an incredibly heavy lift for our unit, and **risky**. But we all had passion – for both the college and for our modernization strategy, and I truly believed, and still do, that if we did not do this extension would not be around much longer - so we were determined we were not going to fail.

In September 2017, five years after we pitched the strategy, we launched a new business model and digital infrastructure for Penn State Extension that gives our educators incredible tools to educate in today's world.

It was hard, it was risky, and it did not launch without incredible pain points and stress, but it is the most rewarding accomplishment in my career.

We started with about 25 people; we now have around 50. Our team does not look like it did 10 years ago. We now have CRM specialists, e-commerce experts, marketing strategists, registration specialists, instructional designers. And we are moving the needle for Extension.

The President of Penn State has recognized Penn State Extension as leading the way to what he calls Penn State 2025 - a vision for Penn State to provide life-long learning and deliver diverse educational options to all students accessible 24/7/365. We have basically built the World Campus of non-credit at Penn State. Why? Because it needed to be done, it is communication in today's world, and it combines all our traditional skill sets - writing, design,

marketing, PR, photography, videographers, and marketing operations (infrastructure) into one strategic passion and purpose.

As communication units, we have always helped create publications, media releases, videos, etc. Now the opportunities are huge. We can help provide critical online and blended courses for sector specific workforce development, which is a priority for agriculture. We created an online training course for our state department of agriculture to grant travel permits to businesses due to the spotted lanternfly quarantine - and in less than a year we have had more than 10,000 people take the course. We could have never done that before.

So why do I share this...because you are not just a writer, or a photographer, or an editor, or a communicator- you are part of an incredible force in today's world. Communication and marketing rules. I encourage you to Be Passionate - Think Big - and be Strategic and you can change the world, or at least your little part of it!

I want to mention one other reality. Administrative staff are often on the front line of change in organizations, because, as our provost eloquently stated recently, they know more about the business of the university than I or the faculty. However, the front lines can be a very uncomfortable place to be!

Before I close - Back to ACE - I started coming to ACE 13 years ago when I felt totally outside my comfort zone - when Ag Comm came into my unit. Never heard of ACE before then. I have come ever since. I come to get to know my peers, to network, to get ideas, and in large part to vent to those who understand. I also come to share - successes and failures - and learn the same from others.

So, for those who are new here, I encourage you to keep coming, spend your time wisely and network broadly. There are some incredibly talented people in this organization to learn from. And take on a leadership role. I found serving on a Learning Community and the board extremely rewarding.

And for those of you who are not so new, thank you for mentoring me, teaching me, and encouraging me.