

# Jennifer W. Siciliano

## In the Thick of Things

Jennifer Siciliano didn't have any idea what she'd like to be when she left for college at Marymount University in Virginia. Both of her parents were educators, but she wasn't so sure she wanted to follow in their footsteps. Armed with a desire to have her car at school and a requirement by her parents to independently fund that desire, led her to what would be the first step in her career journey. Jen headed over to the career center one fateful day to flip through a three-ring binder full of local job opportunities. By chance, a call for interns—unpaid, of course—in the office of Alaska Representative Don Young had been stuffed into the wrong binder. Jen hadn't been looking for an internship in the U.S. House of Representatives but the letter intrigued her. Maybe being on Capitol Hill in the thick of things would be a worthwhile experience.

She made her way to Rep. Young's office where she was quickly brought on in a volunteer capacity. She did it all—opening mail, answering phones, running errands for the staff two days a week. By her junior year, the volunteer position turned into a formal paid internship and during the second semester of her senior year a life-changing opportunity took place. Rep. Young's front desk staffer left the position, and the Congressman offered it to her. Jen had a light course-load that semester, but even so, she wasn't sure how a full-time job would fit into her college schedule. Rep. Young asked her to speak with her professors about finishing the semester remotely. She talked to them and was able to successfully complete her education and work full-time. Jen smoothly transitioned from college into a career on Capitol Hill where she quickly climbed the ranks. She ultimately ended up as the Communications Director for the Senate Appropriations Committee before leaving Capitol Hill 13 years after she started as a volunteer.

After several intervening years as a

lobbyist, Jen landed at Inova Health System (Inova) where she currently serves as the Chief External Affairs and Communications Officer. Although she left her days on Capitol Hill behind, she never left her passion for positive change, or her enjoyment of being in the thick of things. "My job is a lot of different things to a lot of different people," she explains. "It's government relations, it's community relations, it's marketing; I have all those teams alongside me. I think my entire career has been about being in the middle of things, being where things happen. I think I'd be bored if I didn't have something different to do every day. That's one of the beauties of this job; no day is ever the same, and I wouldn't have it any other way."



Inova is a respected non-profit healthcare provider serving over two million patients a year at five major hospitals—four in Fairfax County and one in Loudoun County. It employs around 19,000 people in the region and is constantly working to expand its services and level of care. It boasts a heart and vascular institute, a cancer institute, and a neuroscience and spine institute, as well as Northern Virginia's only Level 1 Trauma Center and Level 4 Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It also enjoys a stellar reputation, with all of their hospitals earning the top grade of 5 stars from the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Their Inova Fairfax Hospital was recently listed as number 1 in the region by US News and World Report.

"I love our mission because it's simple, easy to understand, and all our employees live by it every single day. Our mission is to provide world-class healthcare, every time, every touch, to each person in every community we have the privilege to serve," affirms Jen. "The history of Inova is that it was created by the community, for the community, because it was what they needed."

Way before my time, when Fairfax County was very rural, a group of community leaders recognized the need for health care and as the story goes, came together around someone's kitchen table and made it happen. We've always been a really large part of this community. The marketing team makes fun of me because I always bring up that kitchen table where the idea was born. Personally, I want to find that kitchen table! It would be a great historical item to have!"

Jen previously worked for Inova as a consultant when they were one of her clients, but she became a full-time employee in 2007. In her 13 years with the team, she's seen a fair amount of growth and a lot of change. The constantly changing regulatory environment is the main reason for the change, but Jen emphasizes that the core focus on patient care has always been strong. Most recently, Inova completed the Schar Cancer Center and seeing the transformation there has been a joy. "I remember when we acquired the property, an elected official said to me that the (former Exxon Mobil) building looked 'like Darth Vader's summer home'," laughs Jen. "The challenge was turning that into the beautiful clinical space it is now." And it's not only the aesthetics and design that set the Schar Cancer Center apart. "In the past, when you had a cancer diagnosis, you would have to travel to many different places—for appointments with various physicians, for tests, etc.—in order to receive your care, but now we have everything in one space, in one building thanks to the feedback from doctors, nurses, and patients," explains Jen. "After you park, you can access all of your care in one place. At a very difficult time in people's lives, being able to provide that service is gratifying."

As much as Jen loves being at the pulse of things today, she grew up feeling far from the center of anything in the little town of Marbury in rural Charles County, Maryland. Her father had grown up across the road, and early on, her grandmother lived in the same house where he was raised. Jen's father lost his dad when he was young and his Aunt Margie and Uncle Bob had a big hand in raising him. They lived next door, and Jen's father was very close to them.

Jen was an only child but she often spent time at Aunt Margie and Uncle Bob's feeding the chickens or helping with their corn and kale crops. Family was always close by.

The community was close, too. When Jen

was about six years old, she got involved with the local church youth group, and ever since, faith has been an important part of her life.

She also became very involved with the local 4-H club and participated in photography, the fashion revue, and public speaking. She thrived with public speaking. Around the age of 11, she made it to the State-level public speaking finals and went home with the top prize. Jen also loved music and attended summer camps at Deep Creek Lake every year. After camp, she would travel to nearby Western Maryland to spend two weeks with her maternal grandparents, with whom she was also very close. "I would go to camp for 2 weeks, my grandparents would pick me up from camp, and I'd spend another 2 weeks with them," Jen recalls. "I literally was gone for a month of the summer."

Academically, Jen did well. Her father was a middle school principal for 44 years, while her mother spent 38 as a math teacher in the county. When Jen entered high school, her mother became her Algebra I teacher, an arrangement that didn't always go swimmingly. "I'm not the most math inclined person you'll ever meet," smiles Jen. "I think that's why I was attracted to communications! In that math class, my father will tell you, I got no special treatment from my mother. My father would often be the one waving the white flag at home and trying to make peace between us."

With her mother teaching at the high school, Jen didn't get into much trouble. In fact, she ended up having a perfect attendance record from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. "I remember intentionally going to the office one day during middle school and telling them I felt sick and needed to go home," grins Jen. "I told them to call my dad!" Instead, her mother got wind of it and sent her back to class with her tail between her legs. "As much as I laugh about that, I will say that there are days when you just don't feel like getting up and going, but you know you're capable of it," reflects Jen. "My mother gave me that discipline to follow through regardless of how I felt."

Both of Jen's parents demonstrated the importance of giving back to the community. They were active volunteers with several organizations. From her mother, Jen says she got her drive and competitive side; from her father, she got his empathy and compassion. In his free time, her father was a private pilot and would often take Jen

out flying. Today, her father is suffering from Alzheimer's, but he still recalls their annual tradition of traveling to see the Blue Angels flying in Ocean City, Maryland. "He has good days and bad," says Jen. "The last time we were there to see the Blue Angels, we decided to take the bus to the viewing area. He was worried we were going to be late to see the planes. All of a sudden we heard a jet, and he told me what kind of jet it was by the sound it made. I pulled up the schedule on my phone, and sure enough, he was right. Alzheimer's is a terrible disease, but we are rewarded when he has those amazing moments of clarity."

Thanks in part to her parents' lifelong emphasis on education, Jen finished high school with a strong resume. She had been involved in student government, had done well in class, and played Varsity Field Hockey all 4 years wearing jersey number 17. Jen notes that her youngest daughter, Ryleigh, also plays high school field hockey; when it came time to choose her jersey, she chose 17 to match mom.

Jen applied to several colleges and decided on Marymount University thinking it was a good mixture of close-enough-to-visit and far-enough-mom-and-dad-won't-drop-in. On her college visit day, she remembers being so nervous she burst into tears and said to her father that she didn't want to go to college. Her mother told her to, basically, get it together.

With a little tough love, Jen was out the door and soon thriving. She decided to major in Communications and Politics and ended up becoming President of the Student body. "I remember one of the big issues when I was in office was that the bookstore was carrying *Cosmo* magazine and the nuns did not want it," says Jen. In the end, we worked out a compromise. We got to keep our *Cosmo*, but it had to have a cover over it just as if it were a *Playboy*. My first successful campaign!"

By the time she graduated, Jen was already set up in her job at Congressman Young's office, where she worked at the front desk for a year before being promoted to Scheduler. Meanwhile, she decided to go back to school at American University to get her Master's in Public Communication, through a program for Capitol Hill staffers. While completing the program, she was offered another promotion—the Press Secretary role which was a perfect fit for the skill set she was cultivating.

Jen stayed in Congressman Young's office for three more years before briefly jumping over to the House Science Committee. Right away, she felt the role wasn't the right fit and began working on an exit strategy. However, before she could even plan her next role, she received a call from Senator Ted Stevens.

"I was maybe two months into my job on the Science Committee when my phone rang," recalls Jen. "A voice just said, 'Jen? Ted Stevens. My press secretary is leaving - Thursday 1:30, come see me.' I said 'ok,' and on Thursday, I headed over. The first thing he asks me when he sees me is, 'did you make a decision?' I was confused and asked, 'make a decision about what?' He goes, 'The job!'" It turned out Ted wanted to hire her on as Communications Director for the Senate Appropriations Committee. Jen jokingly said she would think it over, but she knew right away it was a great opportunity.

In fact, Jen loved the job and the leadership example Senator Stevens exuded but her years there were not without some difficult times. Her maternal grandparents, with whom she was very close, passed away during her tenure, and she recalls it as a defining moment. "It was one of the first times I'd really had to deal with death," she recalls. "My grandfather was an incredibly dignified gentleman." During his last few days at the hospital she was able to be there with him. She particularly remembers an incident where he sent her out for some butter pecan ice cream. Upon returning, she found that the nurse refused to let him have the ice cream. "My grandfather was dying, and I was determined to give him some butter pecan ice cream if that is what he wanted," says Jen. "I requested to see a supervisor, and the supervisor had no problem with him having some ice cream. So we sat there and ate the ice cream." As she left the hospital, her grandfather told her, "I'll see your blue eyes in heaven," a touching farewell, and the last words he spoke to her.

Another life-changing event took place on 9/11, which was obviously particularly affecting as a staffer at the Capitol. "All I wanted to do was shut down," remembers Jen. "But luckily we were surrounded by many great leaders including Senator Stevens. He helped us understand why we needed to keep going forward. The day after 9/11, we had to come back to the office and keep the government going. I had a very small role in that,

but it was a defining moment. I learned, no matter how bad it gets, you've got to move forward."

By this time Jen had had her oldest daughter, Maggie, and the crazy schedule of Capitol Hill was wearing on her. She decided to try her hand at consulting and took a position at The Podesta Group in 2003. She remained with the firm for four years. It was there that she began representing Inova as one of her clients. Over time she began to think about how she'd like to develop a deeper knowledge of healthcare and Inova, rather than continuing to cultivate the broad range of clients she had at The Podesta Group.

All of these experiences contributed to making Jen the leader she is today. "I feel I have this really unique perspective on things," she muses. "I spent time in the House of Representatives, first as just a casual observer, then in a lot of different positions. I then went to the Senate and got that perspective while working with some of the most amazing legislators of my time. The main lesson for me was that Senator Stevens and Senator Byrd, who ran that committee as co-chairmen for a long time, really epitomized bipartisanship. I have the lobbying perspective and now at Inova have had the non-profit and state and local government experience – all in all, I feel I have a pretty good world view."

As a leader, Jen notes that her style is "incredibly inclusive." "My expectations for my team are very high," she acknowledges. "But I am also flexible and try to make work fun, too. It's easy for people to interpret a strong leader as just tough and lacking empathy. But for me demonstrating kindness and compassion with the folks you're leading speaks to a confidence in yourself and in your people. When you build a foundation of trust with people, they want to be a partner with you."

To young people entering the working world for the first time, she advises self-compassion, too. "Forgive yourself when you don't get it right," encourages Jen, "especially when you're new in your career and growing professionally. You're not perfect, and that's okay." She also emphasizes the importance of making connections with others, and not being afraid to do the dirty work. "I try to learn something from every person I meet, and I try to give them something as well," Jen affirms. "That's important, because it's all about relationships. I feel incredibly lucky, the way that my path has taken me. I've worked really hard to get here. I especially worked really hard in my early days. You have to be willing to do the non-glamorous, non-sexy stuff. That only adds to a well-rounded perspective and lays the foundation of who you are, your leadership style, and your success."

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*