##### [00:00:00.490] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton and you're listening to Harper Talks, a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Today on Harper Talks, I'm excited to speak with Kari-Ann Ryan. She is a 1999 graduate of Harper College who transferred to Western Michigan University, where she earned a BA in Marketing. She currently works as the director of Marketing and Development for Midwest Moving and Storage, among other things. Kari-Ann joined me in the newly renovated studios of WHCM in the A building on campus. Kari-Ann, thanks for being here today. How are you?

##### [00:00:33.200] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I'm great. Thank you so much for having me. Studio is amazing.

##### [00:00:36.200] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's nice here. And it's a nice day outside as well.

##### [00:00:39.070] - Kari-Ann Ryan

It is, yeah.

##### [00:00:40.500] - Brian Shelton

Fantastic. So we are recording this just a couple of days before you are going to be named a Harper College Distinguished Alumni. That must be exciting.

##### [00:00:51.750] - Kari-Ann Ryan

It's very exciting. It was something I never really thought about till it was brought to my attention, and I was like, well, yeah, I am a Harper graduate, so, yeah, I think I'm okay with that.

##### [00:01:03.730] - Brian Shelton

You think you're okay with that? All right, that's good. Well, I'm very excited for you, and we'll talk about that here in a bit. But you were at Harper in the 1990s.

##### [00:01:15.060] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Yeah, right.

##### [00:01:16.460] - Brian Shelton

And so this might be hard for some people listening to understand, but in the 1990s, you were in college before the Internet and cell phones and before all that was like, in every facet of our lives. What was that like?

##### [00:01:31.630] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Like you said, it's weird to think about that concept now, but it was very different. Even just registering, you had to come here and do some paper registration stuff. But yeah, it was a different experience and none that you can really explain to people now because they just don't get it. The concept is just so bizarre.

##### [00:01:54.010] - Brian Shelton

I know, it's so odd. Right? You talk about the registration. I remember I was freshman year of college in 1993, walking around tables and putting a sticker on the back of a sheet. And that was each class that you had.

##### [00:02:06.140] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I don't remember exactly. I just remember being and I think it was in this building, too, that you literally got in line and you went from table to table to do the different parts of the registration and pick your classes and stuff. And it was nerve wracking because you're new, you're a new student and stuff like that. But yeah, now we got it easy. We just click a few buttons and we're done with everything that we need to do.

##### [00:02:29.860] - Brian Shelton

But think about how peaceful life was back then before email and text messaging was in your life, like all day, every day. Right. Anyway, I'm being nostalgic about the pre Internet world, for sure, so I would also say, though, I did notice you were here for a while.

##### [00:02:47.940] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I was here for a while. I had a very unique Harper experience, but it was one that I wouldn't change. I mean, yes, I was here for ten years.

##### [00:02:55.960] - Brian Shelton

So why were you here for ten years? What precipitated that?

##### [00:02:59.980] - Kari-Ann Ryan

So when everybody was kind of getting ready to go away to school, my path looked a little bit different. I had already started working. I had a job in high school as well, but I realized that I really liked what I was doing. I was working in retail. So right out of school, I had entry level management position in retail, and I was like, I kind of like this path. I like what I'm doing. And so right out of said right out of high school, I said, well, I think I'm just going to go to Harper. At least I'll start part time and do what I have to do and never give up the goal of getting my degree while I figure out if this is a career path for me.

##### [00:03:42.470] - Brian Shelton

So you wanted to keep working while going to school?

##### [00:03:45.240] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I did. I really liked what I was doing, and I knew that I was good at it, and being a pretty young manager in retail as well, I was like, okay, I think I can do this. So, yeah, fast forward. I never missed a semester. I even took some summer semesters, and, yeah, it took me ten years. When you take one class, it takes a while, so a semester, it takes a little while, but I never gave up. I was very committed to the goal of just working through my career and continuing on that path and seeing where it would go and growing in that career while I finished school. And anytime I had a manager change over or a job changeover, I always made it very clear I do go to school at least part time, but that's important to me, so I got to keep going with that.

##### [00:04:36.460] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Would you recommend that path?

##### [00:04:38.900] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Oh, definitely. I think just everything I learned in that career life of mine at that point, it made me who I am today. So definitely, I highly recommend it. And it takes a lot of what's the word? Commitment, because you can easily with one class here and there, you can easily be like, I'll take some time off and then never go back. Right. That was never an option for me. I didn't want to be that person, so I stayed my path with that end goal in mind.

##### [00:05:12.280] - Brian Shelton

So you would again take ten years to do it?

##### [00:05:16.210] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I probably could have done it a lot quicker. Yeah, I mean, let's be honest.

##### [00:05:19.130] - Brian Shelton

Just teasing.

##### [00:05:19.810] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I probably could have done it a lot quicker, but yeah, I wouldn't change it. No, it worked out perfectly for me. By the time I was at the point where I literally finished my associate's degree, at the same time that my career could take a different change. So it was like, when you're in retail, you can only go so far, and then you got to go to the next level. Clearly, after you're in it for that long, do you want to go to the next level or maybe, is it time for a change? And that's worked out perfectly for me. It was time for a change. And so then I quit work and went to finish my degree at Western Michigan.

##### [00:05:57.420] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. I think that that path is interesting because two common things that I see with folks after being in this field for so long is that, one, they've chosen a major, but they don't really know what that is. And then they've graduated with an enormous amount of debt in a lot of cases, and then they've studied for something that they don't actually want to do. Right, yeah. And then the second is they do graduate with a degree that they're interested in doing, but they have no real experience with anything, and then show up to an employer, and the employer is not really interested in dealing with them as well.

##### [00:06:33.920] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I kind of had the best of both worlds in that because I did pursue a degree that I ended up working in.

##### [00:06:41.470] - Brian Shelton

Right.

##### [00:06:41.790] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Number one, and in what I was doing with retail management and marketing and sales and all that, that really helped me further the marketing degree. It all kind of resonates together.

##### [00:06:58.440] - Brian Shelton

Right, that's cool. So after you did that, you transferred to Western Michigan University. Did you feel like you were prepared once you got there?

##### [00:07:07.440] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Yeah, absolutely. The fact that I was committed to however much school I was doing prior to that, but it was important to me. If you look at my GPA from Harper, it wasn't great... (laughter)..... When you're taking one semester here and there, but I was definitely prepared. Okay, now it's serious time. It's full time. I'm going to finish this degree. And I graduated with honors. I got great grades.

##### [00:07:37.640] - Brian Shelton

What was that like for you, being able to go to school and be just dedicated to doing that?

##### [00:07:41.480] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I loved it. Yeah, I loved it. The very first part of, like, do I quit my job and go finish school full time was a big decision. And I was very lucky at the time to have a great support system. Friends, family, everybody was like, yeah, this is good for you. I think you should do this. Whereas when you're thinking about it, you're making really good money in a job who's going to tell you to quit.

##### [00:08:07.600] - Brian Shelton

Right.

##### [00:08:08.240] - Kari-Ann Ryan

So I was really lucky in that. My dad owns a small business in Schaumburg. At the time, it was a thriving small business in Schaumburg, and he was always, oh, you're going to run this business someday. So it was a great decision for him because he's like, okay, you go finish your degree. You work for me while you're in school, when you come back for summers and whatnot, and then when you're back full time, you're taking the business over. So it all kind of fell again into place. Now, that didn't end up happening totally. I did work for him for a long time, but things change and moved on to the next career path.

##### [00:08:43.900] - Brian Shelton

That's great. How did you choose marketing as your major?

##### [00:08:47.190] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Honestly, I don't even know why I chose it. I just was interested in it. I think it was the general degree. So I was in retail, and I was following the retail certificate here at Harper, and marketing was a nice parallel to that. And I was interested in the classes. I think one of the first classes I took might have been something business related, and I was like, oh, yeah, I really like this. Growing up with my dad who was an entrepreneur, and my mom who always worked, and my grandma who always worked. I had a really strong sense of career and entrepreneurialism. I think it just kind of fit. And once I started in that path, I really liked it. I'm very creative and business minded. So when you put those two together, you have marketing.

##### [00:09:41.790] - Brian Shelton

Okay. Fantastic. Love it.

##### [00:09:44.140] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I just made that up. That's not in any textbook anywhere.

##### [00:09:47.190] - Brian Shelton

We're going to write it down. Yeah. We're going to publish that on the internet. That's going to go on your new LinkedIn profile, right? Yeah. That's good. I like it. So you are the director of marketing development for Midwest Moving & Storage. What does that mean? What do you do? What do you do? What's your job?

##### [00:10:01.890] - Kari-Ann Ryan

So Midwest Moving & Storage, we're actually two moving companies. We have the midwest side. We also have Chicago office movers. I actually work for both companies owned by the same person, and so I run all of the branding and marketing internally and externally for both brands. When I first started with them, they had an outdated website, an old logo. I've been there for almost seven years, and we just celebrated our 40 years in business. So they had some steps to take to get updated, and I was so up and ready for the challenge. And so, yeah, I just oversee everything that looks that we want to portray who we are comes through me first. Okay. And then on the development side, I am out in the community a ton. When I first started with them, I was already active in two major chambers in the area and active as in attending events, being on committees, starting out in some leadership positions. And so when I started with Midwest said, you know, I'm here and there, and he said, great, we want you to be in those. We are also part of those lightly, but we want to get more involved.

##### [00:11:13.050] - Kari-Ann Ryan

So I was able to keep that as part of my job. And when I say development, it's like I'm not out there selling, but I'm bringing in the referrals and the leads by being the face of the business in these community spaces.

##### [00:11:31.310] - Brian Shelton

That's really neat. Why is it important? Maybe this is something that maybe some young college student who's maybe just finishing up school or something like that isn't aware. Why is it important to be a part of the SBA and the Chamber and that sort of thing?

##### [00:11:43.010] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Oh my gosh there's so many great things about being a part of something in the community, be it a chamber, an association, some kind of a nonprofit group, for so many reasons. You can utilize your personal skills to help those chambers or those people within the chamber, the members, and find different kind of paths that match you and align with you as your personal branding and your personal goals. And it really helps the business that you're a part of. Now, when you're a new student, maybe you're not so much gung ho about backing the job that you might have just yet, but you're still kind of building up that personal brand for yourself and building relationships, that's probably the biggest, biggest thing. I started out by saying the things that I probably gained from it by being able to utilize my skills. But in the end, it's all about building relationships and in so many different ways for your business, for yourself, for your interests, and helping the people that you are building those relationships with. When people ask me for something, I always say I got a guy because I know so many people by being so involved.

##### [00:13:01.540] - Brian Shelton

So it's about networking, right? And that networking is so important, which is an important lesson for young college students or people just starting their career.

##### [00:13:08.510] - Kari-Ann Ryan

And some people don't like that word because it feels like a job, it feels like work. But if you do it right, you really are just out there making friends.

##### [00:13:17.810] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, and it's so important, right? Because that happens all the time, right? You're like, boy, I really need help with X, Y and Z. I wish I do know somebody. I do know somebody who can help me with that. So yeah, it is really important. Outside of work and out of the chamber and such. You do a lot of volunteer work around Alzheimer's. Tell me about that.

##### [00:13:38.200] - Kari-Ann Ryan

So my grandmother had Alzheimer's. She battled the disease for over 13 years, I say over 13 years because there's signs way before you really know what's going on. So she lived with us. So I got to witness it firsthand and watch every single possible stage that they go through and all the good, bad and ugly that happens with it. And so around 2009, I started to find something that I could get involved with to support the disease. I couldn't support her, I couldn't fix her. I had zero control over what she was going through. But selfishly, I needed some control for myself to deal with the fact that I couldn't control it. So I had found the Alzheimer's Association and had started originally. They have walks in many different cities and states, and I started walking in the walk and built a team that just really grew to something I had no idea it was going to grow into after 14 years or so of doing it.

##### [00:14:45.740] - Brian Shelton

That's amazing. What was that like growing up with your grandmother that way? I mean, how did that affect your life growing up? Right.

##### [00:14:56.220] - Kari-Ann Ryan

We were very close. Yeah. Obviously, like I said, she lived with us before she lived with us. She lived a block away, so I grew up with her. We went shopping every Saturday together. We had a very good, close relationship. So watching what she went through was terrible, to say the least, especially as they really get into the disease. In the beginning, it's more so a frustration because you have this loved one and you don't really understand what's going on, but you know something's different, and you know that they're misplacing things or forgetting things or losing things, and it's really like, what's wrong with you? You're too young to be going through this. So the frustration is not just for them, but for us and for everybody who's supporting that person. And there's no words to describe how horrible this disease is to watch, no matter what path somebody goes on with it. Some people have it for a short period of time, unfortunately pass quicker than others. That story is just as terrible and horrible as my story of 13 plus years. So it was not fun.

##### [00:16:21.320] - Brian Shelton

No, absolutely not. But it certainly has shaped you, though, right? And it's made you a very determined person. It's made you somebody who is focused on what it is that they're doing and so that you can maybe affect outcomes for others. Right?

##### [00:16:32.930] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Definitely. I definitely feel the effects of what my passion for this disease has brought to me and people around me and the support that I got and now the support I can give back to others. There's just no words for it.

##### [00:16:52.560] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that's great. You're part of two other groups that I found really interesting. I love the one. It's called lemons of love. I just love the name. And the other one backyard experience. Tell me about both of those, what you do with those, because it's really neat what you're doing, so just share that with folks.

##### [00:17:05.900] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I'll start with lemons of love. Lemons of Love was something that I helped out with in the very beginning of her starting. So Jill Swanson is a friend of mine, and she went through a cancer situation and realized quickly that being in the chemo situation was not a fun place to be, and she decided to start bringing little gifts and little care packages for the people who were next to her in chemo.

##### [00:17:36.230] - Brian Shelton

Oh, that's cute.

##### [00:17:37.130] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Fast forward. It turned into Chemo care packages, and she just built an amazing nonprofit around this premise and has touched so many people in so many lives in just supporting them through this. And she's an amazing survivor who has just taken kind of the skill set and the community that she had and support that she had. She comes from the racing industry, believe it or not, to bring those resources to support this nonprofit. So in the beginning stages, I had many sit downs with her, and we have these crazy lunches where we go from topic to topic, and we still try to do that once a year. And I was just really happy to be able to support her in the beginning stages. And now my husband and I are still great monetary supporters of them. And if I ever hear of anybody going through chemo, the first thing I do is order a care package to send to them. And it really makes a difference.

##### [00:18:38.280] - Brian Shelton

It's amazing how not to make this about me, but my mother had cancer a couple of years ago, and it's amazing how people kind of and I mean this in the nicest possible way, come out of the woodwork when they find out that a family member is going through that. And so many people are so nice and so generous and so giving of their time and effort to help you take I know that's not unique that my mother experienced, and I hope that it's so good that you do that and that you're involved in that, because people need that kind of support.

##### [00:19:09.890] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Yeah, it's a great organization. So I believed in it from day one, and I'm just so proud of her for where she's started and gone to with this organization.

##### [00:19:22.130] - Brian Shelton

Is that related to Backyard Experience or.

##### [00:19:24.020] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Is that a different, completely different so somebody I knew through the chamber, a really good friend of in, he's an advertising branding expert, but his passion lies in art.

##### [00:19:37.240] - Brian Shelton

Okay.

##### [00:19:37.720] - Kari-Ann Ryan

And he quickly got connected to the Chuck Jones Center for Creativity. They're actually out of California. And Chuck Jones, right. So Bugs Bunny, he's very close with them, and he's a certified artist for them. And they wanted to open a center out here. So he put it under the Backyard Experience, which has the Chuck Jones Center for Creativity underneath it. And then the things that he wanted to do, which was bring creativity and inspiration to children of all ages, we say, because it's not just for kids, it's for adults. And so what I did was I helped him a lot on the marketing side, on the event side, we used to run Saturday morning cartoon events. We still run events at the Schaumburg Boomers and at the Windy City Bulls, which is just a full on creativity stations for the kids to come while they're at the game and just create. That's all it's about is just create. No matter what the avenue is, just inspire and create. And so he did some things with some of the local hospitals around here. So some of the funds that he brought in helped support that. They made creativity carts for kids that were stuck in the hospital.

##### [00:20:54.150] - Kari-Ann Ryan

They could wheel in the cart and find some things to do and create with. He did some really cool things with the libraries and bringing the Chuck Jones Center out here. Since then, he has relocated to Florida. So we're still doing some of the events here, but he's working on reloading it in the was a yeah, that was a great experience to know do something different with the kids. And I love art. I'm not the greatest artist, but my son's a good artist. So we got very involved in helping that and supporting that.

##### [00:21:25.370] - Brian Shelton

That's really cool. What motivates you to do all this volunteer work? How do you have time for this?

##### [00:21:30.170] - Kari-Ann Ryan

If I had a dollar for every time somebody said that to me, I would be a millionaire and not have to do anything anymore. I don't know. I think different reasons motivate me. I don't like to stay stagnant. I'm not a lazy person, not that anybody is, but I like to keep busy. So when one door closes and maybe something ends, then the next door opens and I'm on to the next thing. And I also try to be very strategic as far as, like, Alzheimer's is my thing. That's my passion, my purpose, and where I'm going with. But if things come up that I can help people in other avenues, I'm happy to do that. However it looks. If it's a donation, if it's volunteering for an event, they have just in supporting them, just sharing their social media, whatever it is, I am all in. If I believe in what that cause is and what they're trying to do.

##### [00:22:25.460] - Brian Shelton

Okay, yeah, that's great.

##### [00:22:26.580] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I want people to do it for me.

##### [00:22:28.080] - Brian Shelton

Right.

##### [00:22:28.930] - Kari-Ann Ryan

And it's not that I'm doing it for that reciprocation. It really is that I know that the more you give out into the universe, the more you receive back. Okay. If it fits in my time, I'm there to do it.

##### [00:22:43.540] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. That's great. So I ask all the folks that I bring in for this podcast. Kind of the same question that's really broad, but what advice do you have for current Harper students? If you could sit them all down in a room, what would you tell them?

##### [00:23:00.940] - Kari-Ann Ryan

I think I would have to go with what my outlook was, was just like having a goal in mind and being committed to it. Because you're going to have ups and downs and you're going to have things that come and go and maybe you have a bad class or something goes on personally at home and you have to take a step back from school. But being committed to completing whatever portion of your education, there's a reason you're here, right? So being committed to completing whatever portion of that education path you want to complete keep that in mind because that's your ultimate goal, and you got to be committed to it. You got to figure out the ways to get past the other stuff and just keep doing it.

##### [00:23:42.380] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. No excuses, right?

##### [00:23:43.960] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Yeah. Well, I mean, you could have an excuse here and there, but get back at it.

##### [00:23:49.430] - Brian Shelton

I see that a lot. I see students, they get overwhelmed and then you're like, I know you got overwhelmed last week, and I know that now you're concerned about how that's going to affect grades or whatever, but let's move on, let's move forward. Let's not look back.

##### [00:24:01.660] - Kari-Ann Ryan

That overwhelmed feeling is a great way to learn, too. Like, figure out what overwhelms you and how to overcome it.

##### [00:24:08.880] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that's great. So you excited you're going to be a distinguished alumni. Are you going to carry a cup around that says, I'm a distinguished alumni, or are you going to I really.

##### [00:24:18.850] - Kari-Ann Ryan

Don'T know what to expect. I have to say, working with this program, with all the people that have put this together has been a dream. They are so organized in this award process. I am impressed, and I hold people to a higher standard, like I said, very organized and succinct with everything I do and very diligent. So I really appreciate how this is put together and how professional and fun they're making it for us as an awardee. Is that a word awardee? Yeah, sure.

##### [00:24:57.520] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, whatever I think it is. Yeah, we're going to go with it. Well, I thank you so much for being here, had a lovely time talking with you. And I congratulate you on being one of the newest Harper College Distinguished Alumni. It's such a cool thing. It's such a cool program, and it's so great to bring people back to campus for it.

##### [00:25:15.590] - Kari-Ann Ryan

It is. Thank you.

##### [00:25:16.470] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's very exciting. Kari-Ann Ryan is a Harper College Distinguished Alumni whose volunteer work helps transform lives. If you're enjoying Harper talks, please subscribe. And while you're at it, rate and review us so that others might find us. Harper Talks is a co production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode will be edited by Coby Pozo. Our online content producer is Matt Byrne. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.