

On Campus

Rutgers Alumna Watches History Unfold Outside MSNBC Studio

Production assistant to Rachel Maddow parlayed internship into broadcast news job

By Fredda Sacharow



Credit: Lisa Soga

Julia Nutter, left, joins her boss, Rachel Maddow, center, who was on campus for an interview with Eagleton Institute's Ruth Mandel.

In 2008, Julia Nutter covered the Obama election for Rutgers' radio station WRSU, broadcasting from the fourth floor of the Rutgers Student Center as swarms of students chanted excitedly on College Avenue.

The year 2010 found the newly minted graduate working the elections once again, this time on a slightly broader scale.

Her email signature says it all: "Julia Nutter, MSNBC – The Rachel Maddow Show."

At 22, the Manhattan resident has a job many of her peers would trade their iPhones for. As production assistant to one of the country's leading on-air pundits, Nutter watches from a unique perch as history unfolds, outside her studio and in.

If she's not researching Egyptian history to give context to the rioting on Tahrir Square or assembling research packets in advance of a Maddow interview with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Nutter is choreographing her boss's trips for location shoots or helping produce graphics for that evening's show.

"There's no such thing as a typical day. Every day brings new surprises and challenges" says Nutter, who describes herself as "Rachel's go-to person."

'Without Rutgers, I would not have done the radio work, or gotten involved with voter registration.' – Julia Nutter

"A lot of times, segments change at the last minute, which for the staff means a lot of rewrites, adjustments to video and graphics, and a game plan to ensure everything goes smoothly. We're always on the edge of our seats, but it's all exhilarating and very exciting," she says.

The excitement started in January 2009 for Nutter, then a Rutgers junior with a double major in journalism and media studies and political science. That's when she began an internship with NBC News, working in talent recruitment and development.

She credits her experience at WRSU and the Journalism and Media Studies Department at the Rutgers School of Communication and Information with helping her get a foot in the broadcast-world door.

"I learned a lot about how a television show gets put on the air and the people behind the scenes who make it happen," she recalls of the stint at NBC. The new skills helped her score an interview for an internship with the Maddow show which has turned into a full-time job.

“Rachel is brilliant and has an incredible sense of humor – she is someone you can look up to, like a professor you’d have in college,” Nutter says.

She started work full-time as production assistant at MSNBC the week after she graduated. She finds the pace on the job intense, the atmosphere professional and deadline-driven.

“During the show, I’m on the set with Rachel in case there is breaking news,” Nutter says. “We were on air with [NBC News chief foreign correspondent] Richard Engel when shooting started in Tahrir Square, and we had to make sure Rachel had the most up-to-date information possible. It was a crazy night, but very interesting.”

In a year when filled with revolutions, riots and acts of God, one story stands out for the North Brunswick native, as it does for many Americans: the May 1 killing of Osama bin Laden.

“I was at a party when I heard about it,” Nutter remembers about the Sunday night announcement by President Obama. “The first thing I did was get into a car and listen to the radio – and yes, I realize how retro that was!”

Although she doesn’t consider herself a political person, she was drawn into that milieu as a junior, when faculty members at Rutgers’ Eagleton Institute of Politics sought out Nutter – then a WRSU disc jockey and reporter – to moderate a mock debate called “RU Ready to Vote?” for the 2008 presidential election.

Eagleton’s Youth Political Participation Program, which focuses attention on the civic education of high school and middle school students, sponsored the event. The experience turned Nutter on to the cause of student voting, which in turn prompted her to take an internship class at Eagleton with Elizabeth Matto, the program’s director.

“I love Rutgers, and still consider myself a big fan. Without Rutgers, I would not have done the radio work, or gotten involved with voter registration,” Nutter says. “The location was also vital: Being so close to the train station and to a city was pivotal.”

On April 13, 2011, past and present collided for Nutter, as she stood backstage and watched “A Conversation with Rachel Maddow” at the Nicholas Music Center on the Douglass Residential Campus, with Eagleton Director Ruth Mandel interviewing Maddow about her experiences.

The return to campus was sweet for Nutter, she says.

“We had parked just behind the music center, and glimpsed a Mason Gross dance class taking place through the big glass windows,” she recalls. “As soon as the dancers saw Rachel, they ran over to the windows and started waving to her and cheering. It was such a great welcome to Rachel and a wonderful welcome home for me.”