

Kelly Adams

Jennifer Ryan: A Small Town Community's Savior

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By: Kelly Adams

With an education and work experience that surpasses most, Jennifer Ryan could work for any up-scale PR firm she wanted to. She could be reclining in an expensive leather chair, working in a lavish office and taking in a view of New York City. She could even be making an absurd salary.

But she chose not to.

She chose to follow her heart instead. And her heart was telling her she was made for more than financial security and first-class status. Jennifer Ryan's true purpose in life was to help her community in whatever way she could.

An Auburn University graduate with a bachelor's and master's in Communications and journalism, Ryan wasn't at first sure what she wanted to do with her life. She explored numerous opportunities before becoming the manager of marketing and occupational safety and health for the National Safety Council in Orlando, Fla. She worked at the non-profit organization for eight years.

In 2000, the executive director position for Red Cross of Lee County opened up. Ryan said, "When I took the job, I didn't know what I was getting into. But what an amazing journey it's been!"

In addition to being the CEO, Ryan is a basic disaster services instructor for the American Red Cross.

Red Cross of Lee County offers disaster relief classes that educate volunteers about public affairs during times of disaster. The classes range from CPR certifications to

local public affairs for disaster relief. According to Ryan, last year there were 125 students who took the classes, 30 percent of whom were part of the local community.

"We're really trying to get that percentage of locals to go up this year. Those are the people that can be on hand and ready to go fast," said Ryan.

The American Red Cross doesn't only help those affected by natural disasters. Relief comes for those involved in disasters that range from house fires to chemical spills, as well. Ryan must always be communicating with the local police and fire departments about those in need.

She is also in constant contact with other non-profit agencies in Lee County. The Red Cross partners with the Boys and Girls Club, the Child Advocacy Center and the East Alabama Food Bank, to name a few.

Ryan serves as a member of the American Red Cross Presidential Advisory Council. She is also a board member of the East Alabama Chapter of the Public Relations Council of America. The National Red Cross Fundraising team that Ryan is also a member of prepares its members to be deployed elsewhere during times of disaster.

As CEO, Ryan is responsible for hiring people, firing people, asking for money and favors from other organizations and keeping up with all her duties.

"Sometimes I have to be firm. The job isn't easy, and sometimes I'm not the most-liked person in the world, but at the end of the day, I know I've made a difference in someone's life," said Ryan.

Ryan has had to step up and take control of situations that were lacking in that firmness. During the spring of 2008 Prattville tornadoes, public affairs was in an

appalling state. Three days after the tornado hit, there was still little to no media coverage or general knowledge of the disaster released to the public.

When contacted, the American Red Cross Headquarters in Washington D.C. had no idea the tornado had even taken place. A week later, Ryan and her staff had what little video they could scramble and press releases made public. If not for her, the country might not have found out about the tornadoes until much, much later.

Ryan was appalled at everyone's hesitance to get the word out. "People think public affairs during disasters is the *last* thing that should be thought about. But it's really one of the first things! If no one knows about it, how can they volunteer to help?"

Kendal Adams, a former board member of United Way, who works closely with Red Cross, said no one could do the job better than Ryan. "She does an incredible amount of good for the community. She's excellent at her job and is very good at getting things for the benefit of the public."

Adams, lead operations manager for Alabama Power in Auburn, has also been deployed to work during natural disasters. So he knows what it's like to see the public in a helpless state. After his team gets the power back on, Ryan's team steps in for the non-mechanical part of the job.

After a long, hard day at work, Ryan comes home to her son, husband and golden retriever, anxious for a break from her hectic schedule. Yet she gets everything done. When complimented, her only response is a blush and modest "thank you." It turns out that heart that led her to be a knight in shining armor for her community is also a heart of gold.

Work Sources

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