

## On her 'A' game

As producer of NPR's "Hidden Brain," Kara McGuirk-Allison ('95) helps people understand themselves and the world **BY JAN GILLIS ('07)**

"By the age of 28, I had my dream job," says Kara McGuirk-Allison ('95), "and it would never have happened without the connections and foundation I received from JMU."

A public-radio veteran, she has applied her production talents to diverse National Public Radio offerings, from "Justice Talking" to "Weekend Edition." Today, McGuirk-Allison is producer of the NPR podcast "Hidden Brain." The program's exploration of social science research aims to help people "understand the world—and themselves."

McGuirk-Allison enjoys the challenge of the public-radio environment. "You can work on a show that allows you to become an expert on a topic, or work on a news magazine where every day you can be editing four different stories on four different topics."

The seed that blossomed into McGuirk-Allison's career took root on the Madison campus. Transferring to JMU in her sophomore year of college, the mass communications major began working at the student-run radio station, WXJM.

"Because of JMU, my whole career trajectory changed," says McGuirk-Allison. "The NPR affiliate WMRA supervised WXJM during my time there. I became the general manager at WXJM in my senior year. Through that experience, I was shown how public radio works. I fell in love with college radio, educational radio and public radio. I knew that was what I wanted to do with my life."


"JMU is a place that affords students practical opportunities. For those who want to work in radio, the practical, real-world experience is so helpful," she says. And while she lauds those opportunities, McGuirk-Allison says she found further value in her Madison Experience.

"JMU broadened my horizons on so many levels because of the liberal arts education it provides. As a producer, you have to have had an exposure to a lot of things. I got that at JMU. I can look back and still remember classes in poetry, psychology, even terrorism. The exposure to a broad array of thought and experience builds you as a person. It provides awareness and foundation. And, it is what helps you most in the job market today."

It certainly helped McGuirk-Allison. "Producers tend to have very broad interests," she says. That broad focus has come in handy as she collaborates with "Hidden Brain" reporter Shankar Vedantam, the show's host. Recent podcasts have provided insight on wide-ranging topics, from the radicalization of young terrorists to mastering the challenge of starting life anew.

She describes Vedantam as "very rigorous," with "an encyclopedic knowledge about topics." Coupling his exactitude with "those of us who are generalists allows for good storytelling," she says. "That's our goal: to teach people through good storytelling something about social science that they can apply to their everyday lives."

"Podcasts are really enjoying a moment," she says. While she acknowledges that there's a lot to learn about this emerging technology, she's happy to be involved: "It's been great to be in the forefront and working with really good people to make it happen."

Despite the hectic nature of her job—editing, scripting and producing, all at lightning speed—McGuirk-Allison is clearly thriving. "I'm always challenged and always learning something new," she says. "You always have to be on your 'A' game." 

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Kara McGuirk-Allison ('95) says the practical experience she received at JMU and WXJM prepared her for her role with NPR's "Hidden Brain" podcast.