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Carl Sullivan '92

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Network monitor

Nickelodeon exec an advocate for responsible programming

Waiting in the funhouse reception area to meet Jean Margaret Smith, it's easy to imagine that her job must be pretty wacky. With whimsical, brightly colored furniture and multiple television sets blaring episodes of "SpongeBob SquarePants," this is the ultimate kids' playroom.

But Smith's job as senior vice president for public affairs and administration at Nickelodeon is anything but child's play. "My job is to be the conscience of the company in many cases and to be concerned about marketing to kids, to keep tabs on what's going on in D.C.," says the 1986 Furman graduate. "We are an entertainment network, but it's not just all about cartoons."

Indeed, since Janet Jackson's infamous "wardrobe malfunction" during the 2004 Super Bowl, the Federal Communications Commission has been under enormous political pressure to monitor more closely what's broadcast into America's living rooms. And TV shows for children have always been subjected to extra scrutiny by regulators. "The media landscape is changing, and there's a lot of concern" about what children are exposed to, Smith says.

During her 11 years with Viacom's Nickelodeon, Smith has been addressing those concerns. She was hired to start the network's "Big Help" campaign, designed to help children feel more connected to their communities through volunteering.

"We have a real strong sense that with great power comes great responsibility — that we have the ability to help kids connect to their world," says Smith, who also works for Nick at Nite, TV Land and Spike TV. Her role is to build relationships for the company, monitor regulation and legislation, develop alliances with consumer groups and monitor academic research about television.

Oh, and she wears one other hat: She manages the interior office spaces for the networks' headquarters in midtown Manhattan, which entails working with architects to create appropriate workspaces for the creative types employed there.

One of her current projects, "Let's Just Play," aims "to empower kids to make healthy decisions in their lives about being active, through public service announcements and an off-channel, non-television infrastructure to support activities on the local level," Smith says. Partnering with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the National PTA and other groups, Nickelodeon is distributing half a million dollars in grants to local organizations. In October, the network's channels went dark for an entire Saturday afternoon to promote the initiative.

"We know that sedentary lifestyles are



Among her many duties, Jean Margaret Smith serves on the board of directors of the National Education Association Foundation for the Improvement of Education.

causing problems such as obesity, and kids know it too," she says. "We believe we have the power to get this message to kids to have a well-rounded life. We believe that what kids watch, what they see, every experience for kids is a learning opportunity."

There was a time not so long ago when Smith didn't even own a television set. Raised in a world of academia in Columbia, S.C., she majored in history at Furman. "Both of my parents are teachers and two of my siblings are, so I think I was planning to be a teacher or work for a museum."

After graduation, Smith considered graduate school but decided at the last minute "to see a little bit of the larger world." First stop: Washington, where she worked for Rep. Robin Tallon (D-S.C.), starting as a receptionist and working her way up to legislative director. She later joined the House Agriculture Committee to work on nutrition issues.

Next stop: Cairo, Egypt, where she lived for 18 months. "I was taking Arabic and thinking about graduate school in Middle Eastern Studies, plus I had never done the semester abroad thing," explains Smith, who helped manage several freelance projects for the United States Agency for International Development, including a desert reclamation effort and a study on the viability of marketing Egyptian produce in Europe.

But while in Cairo, she says, she realized that she'd "be 85 before I came anywhere close to mastering intermediate

Arabic, so I was looking to come back." About that time, her mentor from her Capitol Hill days, Marva Smalls, asked her to come to New York to work for Nickelodeon.

Which brings us to the latest stop of Smith's round-the-world journey. "I was a little naive," she recalls of her move to the Big Apple. "I thought because I adjusted so well in Cairo and had lived in D.C. I could come to New York and be fine, but it was much harder than I thought."

"It's what every new person in New York feels, I think. How do you connect with people? You try to have lunch with somebody and it takes 18 months." On the plus side, she says, the city was a lot safer than she imagined and a perfect place for the solo explorer.

Eleven years later, Smith remains in New York, although she continues to call Columbia home. "I'm really a small-town girl at heart, but to be the unfamiliar one in a place is more satisfying to me," she says.

That curiosity to explore the world was nurtured at Furman. "From my history classes and German language classes to art history, it was a good four years of not just getting all the facts in, but developing those curiosity muscles that have really enriched my life."

— Carl Sullivan '92

The author holds a degree in political science from Furman. Formerly editor of the Web site for Editor and Publisher magazine, he is now an associate editor at Newsweek.com in New York.