



The

King

of

Media

Media

STORY, PHOTOS AND DESIGN BY NICOLE DONNER

Through the 10 years that Al Sigala has worked as MHCC's director of media and public relations, his allegiance has been to the students and spreading the truth



roadcasting, print journalism, radio DJ: If it's a career connected with media and communicating with the public, Al Sigala has most likely pursued it. Yet until 1997, he didn't know his next big step in life would be a career he's seen and relied on a number of times as a master of communication.

He's not out to trick or deceive people with words or false information. He knows journalists and knows what to tell them when they are searching for a story, making sure he's giving them as accurate information as he can or pointing them in the right direction. How does he know so much about reporters even though MHCC has been his only public relations job? He used to be one.

Since his days at a community college in Mesa, Ariz., Sigala has worked as a reporter in both print and broadcasting. Sigala made the move from reporter at KATU to director of media and public relations at Mt. Hood Community College in 1997.

In recent years, Sigala has seen his share of tough budget times and the threats of cutting classes and closing programs. His recent war is fighting to keep the Child Care Development Center from closing its doors due to the out-of-date building it has occupied for 30 years and new state requirements. What's Sigala's weapon of choice? Information.

"I am providing as much accurate information as possible either to the media or the community," said Sigala. "I can't go out during my day and advocate for a bond election but I can provide the community with information."

The college did seek a bond measure in November 2006

to raise money to repair its facilities, take care of some of its debt, and remodel the Child Development Center. The bond failed but Sigala, along with other staff members, are determined to save the CDC.

The goal is to raise \$2.5 million for repairs and remodel of the building and the challenge for Sigala is making people believe in MHCC and CDC — but he says it's worth the fight. Through attending meetings with community members, organizing slide shows and talking to the many journalists that show up at his door, Sigala fights to keep the CDC with words, not actions.

When the director of media and public relations position opened up at MHCC, he said he found a way to return to his roots and his love for the community college system.

"The timing was good for me because I could help work at something I really believe in," said Sigala. "I could make a difference with people and make a difference in the community, too."

Sigala believed it was a natural move when he made the transition from journalism to public relations after leaving KATU. While running a small business in Medford for a short time before moving to Portland, he has some experience in marketing and the PR system. He also said because of his experience in different forms of journalism, he has a good understanding of media people.

"You realize media people are real people, too," said Sigala. "So you respect that, and you respect each other as individuals. My job is to work with news reporters to provide them with the information they need to write the story they are working on."

As a public institution, Sigala said there's nothing to hide and that all information is public. It's part of his job to guide people and make sure their stories are as accurate as possible. Sigala said he knows what reporters want and how they work and takes the public persona of journalist as "something negative" into consideration.

Keeping the lines of communication open between the college and the public is Sigala's top priority. He doesn't believe he's the soul communicator but can help reporters or the media in their journey and he's just part of the "avenue to those communications."

Knowing everything about everything at the college isn't in the job description for Sigala. But he said part of his job and his responsibilities is to find out.

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going on, know the facts, and make sure the community gets those facts.”

No matter in what direction the conversation heads, Sigala remembers the purpose of his job and that’s to serve the community.

Janet Brayson, publications and newswriting specialist and Sigala’s office neighbor, said she’s seen potential students without appointments come into his office and Sigala will take time to sit down and talk to them.

“He takes a lot of time to explain to them what they can do and why they should come here,” said Brayson. “He cares.”

Since he was young, Sigala knew he wanted to get into communications. He recalls an early story of his parents giving him a tape recorder and then spending much of his time creating mock radio shows. Like many students at MHCC, Sigala started his career attending a community college. He attended Mesa Community College in Mesa, Ariz., where he majored in journalism before transferring to Northern Arizona University and changed his major to broadcasting. He said he liked the program at NAU because of the hands-on experience he received compared to other schools like the University of Arizona or Arizona State.

While attending NAU, Sigala said he worked at the college radio station and at a commercial radio station in nearby Flagstaff. He was a DJ for different types of music, from top 40 to country. He liked picking out songs from the “oldies section.”

“There were certain new songs you needed to play but when it came to older songs, or past hits, you got to pick out the ones you wanted play or liked to play, or requests,” said Sigala. “So, that was pretty neat to be playing songs you’d like to hear.”

He graduated from NAU in 1977 with his bachelors in communication with a concentration on broadcasting. He eventually made the move to Medford, Ore.

“I had a friend who was working at Crater Lake and I was invited to visit. I drove up from Arizona and I woke up the next morning to this beautiful lake. I said to myself, ‘You know what, I would really like to live here one of these days.’”

He worked at a radio station in Medford and later was offered a position at a local TV station doing various job such as assignment editor, producer and reporter. He said in the broadcasting industry, “especially in a smaller market, you’re doing everything.”

Sigala soon left the small market for an opportunity to work at KATU 2 news in Portland. He continued to produce and be a reporter for the news station and he enjoyed the full spectrum of reporter perks.

“Being a reporter is neat,” said Sigala. “You get to do a lot of things that most people don’t get to do, or meet a lot of people that most people don’t get to meet. I got to meet anybody from legislators to covering the president.”

He said one of the biggest thrills he had while working for KATU was feeling the “rush that you get in the media.” He enjoyed the excitement of putting together a story in a matter of minutes and getting the “adrenaline rush you feel while doing breaking news.”

“Part of that rush is not only experiencing the story you’re working on but also the time crunch you’re dealing with,” said Sigala. “It’s crunch time and that’s pretty serious stuff. Not a lot of people can handle that.”

Toward the end of his time at KATU, Sigala said he grew tired of television news shows trying to be “entertainment shows.” He said many news stations go for show and visual effects rather than in-depth news.

Besides his position as the PR director, Sigala is also the one of the founders and adviser for one of the most active student clubs on campus, the Latino Club.

After meeting with many instructors and students nine years ago at a lunchtime gathering to find a way to better communicate with Latino students, the idea was born to start a club. In addition to reaching out to college Latino students, Sigala believes it’s important to help high school students to graduate and continue their success by coming to college.

Sigala hopes that with student clubs like the Latino Club, more clubs will be directed at different cultures and “branch out” to other communities such as Eastern Europeans and Asians.

“I think we have to reflect the community we’re in and we’ve seen an increase in the Russian population. We need to serve them and they need to know we’re here to serve them,” said Sigala. “We need to get them to feel more about how this campus is here for them,” said Sigala. “We need to communicate to them how we’re here for them and they are part of it.”

He also wants to reach out to the working-student community. He likes the idea of distance learning and web classes and enjoys the idea of students learning from home. He wants to better equip students and make sure they’re





“getting what they need and when they need it.” Sigala said he sees the change in the distribution of education and wants to make sure MHCC is in sync with that change.

When he’s not advising student clubs, talking with journalists or any other tasks associated with managing the college’s public relations, Sigala enjoys joking and “picking on” colleagues in surrounding offices. Pam Benjamin, special assistant to the president, calls him her “pesky little brother” because of various jokes he plays on her.

Sigala maintains good relationships with other office personnel, including his supervisor and president of the college, Robert Silverman. Silverman, who also serves as Sigala’s golf buddy, has not heard a complaint from any press or anybody after a conversation with Sigala.

“The proof is in the pudding. He goes out there each month, provides information, gets a lot of press releases and that’s what a good PR guy does,” said Silverman. “He’s been very effective in what he’s doing. He gets a lot of respect from the people who work with him.”

Sigala feels comfortable in his position as the PR man and has long enjoyed the feel and environment of MHCC. Sigala said through all the experiences he has every year, his favorite part is seeing students at graduation.

“That is what everyone here lives for and that’s what makes a difference,” said Sigala. “I want to see the accomplishment and to see students move on. This is what this is about, that’s what makes a difference. That’s when I think I get teary-eyed.”

After 10 years of working at MHCC, Sigala said he hasn’t reached his peak and hopes he doesn’t any time soon.

“Let me share a philosophy I have. If you ever reach the highest point in your career, then everything from there on is downhill,” said Sigala. “Every year we have graduation is great. Every year you get to talk to students and hear about their accomplishments is great. Those are high points but is it my highest point? I hope not.”

Sigala feels comfortable in his position at MHCC and as long as he loves what he’s doing, that makes the difference. He said when he talks to students, he always advises them to find a career that they whole-heartedly love to do because that’s the road he traveled.

“To me, the days go by too quickly and there’s not enough time to do everything you enjoy,” said Sigala. “But if you’re going to do it, make sure you love it. Whatever career you choose, be sure to love it.”



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