

Perfect PR route from N.I. to N.Y.

BY DWAYNE FATHERREE | THE DAILY IBERIAN Updated Jun 5, 2016



Submitted

Jennifer Mestayer, a New Iberia native, has taken a very circuitous route to become the public relations manager for Tabasco. Currently a vice-president for Hunter Public Relations in New York City, Mestayer counts the Avery Island-based hot sauce company as one of her key clients.



Even as a teenager attending Episcopal of Acadiana, friends and family knew Jennifer Mestayer was heading to the big city one way or another.

"I always knew she would leave," said her godmother, New Iberia native and travel agent Beth Comeaux. "That was her desire as a teenager, to travel. She had an interest and always wanted to go to New York or California."

Mestayer managed to live that dream, but not in the way she expected. And it was definitely not part of her vision to be practicing her career back in Iberia Parish.

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"I graduated from LSU in the spring of 2006, right after Katrina and Rita," she said. "I had always planned on a career in public relations in New Orleans, but that was no longer an option. The only things available in Baton Rouge were political PR, or lobbying and that is not what I saw myself doing. So I went to New York City without a job."

To earn money for the move, Mestayer lived in Baton Rouge with her sister, Lauren Barfield, for six months, using restaurant experience gained at places like Peltier's Catering, Silver Spoon, Portabello's and Galatoire's to make ends meet until she made big jump on June 1, 2007.

"I only expected to be there a year or two," she said.

But after landing a gig with public relations giant Weber Shandwick, she never looked back. In the ensuing years, the 32-year-old has represented a variety of clients, from appliance manufacturers like Electrolux and Frigidaire to beverage companies Pepsi and Bacardi.

It was after her time representing Bacardi that she decided to look for something more in the food arena, which led her to Hunter Public Relations, where she serves as a vice-president.

"When I interviewed at Hunter, I was interviewing with the wine team after two-and-a-half years at Bacardi," Mestayer said. "But when I went in for the interview, one of the partners who spent a lot of time in Louisiana started asking me about my years at LSU. So I said I was from New Iberia."

At that point the conversation then became more animated, Mestayer said. She was asked about Victor's Cafeteria, where her father, former New Iberia Police Capt. David Mestayer, had worked as a busboy while in his teens in the early 1970s.

"In my Hunter interview, we specifically bonded over Victor's banana cream pie," she said.

In the end, she did land a job with the firm, but not just the one on the wine side. Hunter's first client, back in 1989, was the McIlhenny Co. of Avery Island. Mestayer's roots made her an obvious choice to handle the account.

"It not only brings me home, but it is a product I grew up with," she said. "It's strange to move away from Louisiana and be able to think every day about the place you call home."

Although she now travels regularly to the area, she is still based out of New York City, which her godmother said is the way Mestayer probably likes it.

"I think she probably misses home, but she enjoys the city life," said Comeaux, who still cooks for Mestayer when she is in town and has visited her in New York. "I think she likes to visit here and enjoy the family, but still live in New York."

"She visits the area whenever she gets hungry," said Michele Nardini of Baton Rouge, Mestayer's mother. "We're thrilled to be able to see her more often."

The geographic ties are not the only benefit Mestayer has enjoyed from her success.

"I've always been passionate about food, so it is wonderful to find a home with Hunter, working with wine clients and Tabasco, talking with people that are so passionate about the food space just like me," she said.

Comeaux said those ties to the food culture are at least as important as the family ties, and probably run just as deep.

"She's always been real interested in cooking," she said. "As a teen worked for a caterer, she got interested in seeing things come together. Her mother is a great baker. There has always been a lot of cooking in the family. My husband and I always cook, so we have to find out what she wants when she comes in. She enjoys the food and cooking that we have here."

That work, though, is a labor of love for Comeaux.

"We're proud of her," she said. "She has a great career."

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