

BY DAN EDELEN

ZOOMING

SARA CULLEY '96 IS MANAGING
EDITOR OF *ELLE* MAGAZINE.





Keen-eyed visitors to the offices of *Elle* magazine in New York City might catch sight of a blur zooming from desk to desk. It's Sara Culley '96, the managing editor. With titles like *Cosmopolitan*, *Giant*, and *Talk* on her résumé, she's gained a reputation for mastering the chaos that defines magazine publishing.

"I don't write and I don't edit. I don't have time. Instead, I manage," Culley says. Her job entails being "mother, babysitter, sheriff, negotiator, counselor, the 'heavy,' and taskmaster." Pulling all the pieces together to make deadline requires another skill: tenacity. If it means "doing the old soft-shoe for the art department just to get them laughing," she'll do it. Until the latest issue goes out the door, though, she's focused. "When that last page is shipped you can take a breath and let people relax."

Culley credits Lafayette with bolstering her directorial skills. "I was an English major, but my focus was theater," she says. For her senior thesis she wrote and directed *Playing in the Outfield*. As stage manager of *Sunday in the Park with George*, she oversaw sound, lighting, staging, casting, and rehearsals. Culley also may have foretold her future in managing craziness by playing the role of Nurse Ratched in Lafayette's production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Direction after Lafayette proved less sure. After some work in film, she moved to New York City and, following a fruitless search for work in advertising, she began temping at media companies around town.

Talk, itself the talk of the publishing world as the brainchild of former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown, called Culley to interview for an editorial assistant position. She turned it down, but a month later, she found herself temping at *Talk*. The vibe at the magazine piqued her interest. Then, as she says, "Tom Stoppard got off the elevator, and I told them I'd stay."

Talk, too, knew it had a winner. "A couple weeks later, I was pulled back into Tina Brown's office," she recalls. "They were going to launch that August and she needed all the help she could get." Working at *Talk* was invigorating. "It was a frenzy. Every day there was a long list of what needed to happen fast."

After the launch, the managing editor left, and Culley assimilated the role's responsibilities while the magazine hunted for a replacement. "I was learning as I went along, a little bit of the school of hard knocks."

In 2002, Culley took a deputy managing editor position at *Cosmopolitan*. She moved to *Giant* in 2005, assuming the role of managing editor, and joined *Elle* in 2006.

She and a writer from *Elle* accompanied President Clinton to Africa to do a story on the Clinton Foundation's charitable work there. She also shot video featured on *Elle's* web site.

"Each magazine has taught me different skills that I have been able to apply to the next position. And being able to satisfy both sides of my brain has sustained me," she says. "I get to be involved in the creative process as well as problem solving on a daily basis. The combination has been extremely fulfilling." ■

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