

Chapter 21

Interview with Sylvia Burgess, Associate Vice President, Cameron University and Former Dean of Business

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1. Where did you grow up? Do you think that it has any impact on your life's work?

I grew up in Lawton, Oklahoma, the child of a career soldier and a mother who worked as a secretary for a real estate agent and politically active community leader. My values would have been set without regard to where I grew up, because my parents were very consistent about demanding ethical behavior, courtesy to all, hard work, and “doing it right”. But growing up in Lawton led me to Cameron University, and the faculty there had an enormous influence upon my career path.

2. Where did you go to school? Why there?

I attended Cameron University for undergraduate work. Neither of my parents had a college education and my father initially suggested I go to the local vocational technical school and become a secretary. I was determined to go to college, however, but had very limited resources, and was fairly shy. Cameron was in my hometown, and was affordable.

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3. What did you do after your first degree (if second degree, where was that done, what did you do after that?) How did you get into your first major area?

After graduating from Cameron with a baccalaureate degree in Communications, I attended law school at the University of Oklahoma, graduating in 1979. It is a bit of a funny story, the time I told my parents my plans. In the prior question, I mentioned that my parents initially suggested I attend a vocational school to become a secretary – my father’s specific words were “college is not for everybody.” I started off my first summer and semester majoring in Speech/Drama, thinking I might become a community theater director – mainly because my closest friends in high school had been interested in theater – not because I had any particular aptitude in that area. It never occurred to me to really think about what might be interesting. The speech and debate departments were housed in a small building, and the faculty knew all the majors in both departments. The debate coach persuaded me to try debate in a small workshop. I did, and found to my great surprise I enjoyed it enormously. It fit me very well – and I then joined the debate team. I worked very hard in my undergraduate studies. I debated and served as an officer in student government – not just for experience but because of the scholarships involved. I graduated in three years with a very high GPA. In the year before I graduated, I had decided to apply to law school. I sat down with my parents on the steps of their small front porch on a lovely fall day to explain my plan to them. My mother was immediately aboard, but my father was terrified. As the youngest of 7 children, having to scramble for necessities and achieving only an 8th grade formal education, he could not quite understand how that ambition arose. He was fully supportive, just worried about whether it was possible. While I was in the last year of law school, I decided to focus on tax law, and applied

to Southern Methodist University to the LL.M. in Taxation program. When I went to my parents to tell them my plans at that point, my father’s attitude was very different – he said “I figured. You sure like school, don’t you!” The funny part is that, as I neared graduation from the LL.M. program, he came to me and said “I have been studying up on this. Where are you going next? They have this thing called an S.J.D. that I think you should go for now.” But when I graduated from SMU in 1984, I was ready to get to work.

I started working for an attorney who had a specialized business, tax and estate planning practice in Lawton. He was also a CPA. His practice included a large number of community leaders, some of whom I already knew from the church in which I grew up, and others I knew through my mother’s office. Her boss was politically active, and had served as the State Chairman of the Democratic Party in Oklahoma and as the United States’ Goodwill Ambassador to Ireland. He had many connections, many of whom had watched me grow up as a child that was often in that office, so I developed a strong client base.

4. Have you had any particularly significant mentors in your career?

Tony Allison, who recently retired, was my debate coach and the Communications Department Chair. He was the strongest mentor I ever had in terms of determining my career path. Early on he decided I had the talent to become a debater, and basically coerced me into trying debate. He knew before I did that research and argumentation would be a passion for me. Under his leadership, my debate partner, Marty McKellips, and I won national championships. Once I was in the full swing of the debate team, he started talking to me about law school. I mentioned above that my father was terrified when I told him I was applying to law school – I had that same reaction when Tony began talking to me about it. I told him I wasn’t smart enough for that, and he laughed at me – told

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