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WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LOCAL OXFORD COMMUNITY
real and relevant stories of six unique paths to success

By:
Karsyn Sloane King

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2020

Approved By

Advisor: Professor Iveta Imre

Reader: Professor Debora Wenger

Reader: Professor Charles Mitchell

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Dedication Page:

To the powerful change-makers who have come before me
and those who will continue after me --
may you always be reminded of all you are capable of, never underestimate your
abilities,
and continue striving towards the path to greatness.

“The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific, and religious freedom
have always been non-conformists.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to the six tremendous women who gave of their time and shared authentically who they are and all they have become.

Thank you to my mom who is the epitome of a woman trailblazer herself and who has taught me everything I know.

Thank you to my thesis advisor, a very strong woman herself, Dr. Iveta Imre, for her countless hours reviewing my work and perfecting my portfolio.

Thank you to the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi and to the School of Journalism and New Media for the opportunity to create an unconventional thesis pursuing what I am most passionate about and continuing to light a fire in my curious nature.

Thank you to my second reader, Dr. Debora Wenger, and my third reader, Dr. Charles Mitchell for their edits and insight.

Thank you to Sam Farrell, who presented his own unconventional Honors Thesis two years ago, and gave me the inspiration to create something different and empowering, just as he did himself.

Thank you to my family for their unconditional and unwavering support of my future endeavors.

Thank you to my friends who encouraged me to finish strong.

Thank you to our Lord, for through Him, all things are possible.

ABSTRACT
WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LOCAL OXFORD COMMUNITY:
real and relevant stories to six unique paths to success
(Under the direction of Dr. Iveta Imre)

Women Trailblazers In The Local Oxford Community is a collection of six women's stories in six different fields and their unique paths to success, all showcased through written and visual elements in a multi-modal website. The goal of the project was to have a diverse compilation of women from a variety of backgrounds, ages, careers, and experiences. The trailblazers represented include a woman in the STEM field (science, technology, engineering, math) who is the only female on the biomedical engineering staff, a first generation college student who now holds the second highest position in higher education academia, a local woman entrepreneur with her own catering business, a woman who majored in art and graphic design in college whose path led her to an elected position in local politics, a woman who is from another country and began her experiences in America through playing collegiate basketball and made history several times along the way, and a woman who has premiered in numerous movies and television series and was crowned Miss Mississippi. Through each of the six stories a lesson can be taught, and readers are left with an insight into who these women are, and how they have become such successful trailblazers, constantly making the world a better place around them. Each woman shares her raw stories and enlightens and inspires others through her own personal experiences and words of wisdom.

Multimodal Website URL: www.mstrailblazers.com



ADVISED BY DR. IVETA IMRE

**real and relevant
stories of 6 unique
paths to success**

WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LOCAL OXFORD COMMUNITY

Robyn Tannehill
Nikki Reinemann
Mary Haskell
Yolett McPhee-McCuin
Brandi Hephner LaBanc
Elizabeth Heiskell



HONORS COLLEGE THESIS

By: Karsyn King

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Preface:

Powerful and successful women have been a constant in my life for as long as I can remember. As a woman myself, I am keenly aware of the obstacle's women endure in the workforce and the reality many today face.

One of the most empowering women in my life, I am blessed to call my own mother. She exemplifies selflessness, grace, hard-work, dedication, sacrifice, strong-will and perseverance.

She is a strong character not only through her words, but through her actions. She taught me how to share my own voice, when to hush and listen, and most importantly, our own destiny is defined by our own self.

Every day when my mom used to drop my sister and I off at school when we exited the car she would say, "Be kinder than you have to, and make the world a better place." These are words I will never forget and will always be ingrained into my memory.

Keeping this philosophy in mind in everything I do, I wanted that motto to stand true in my project.

Living by example and constantly amazed by all she is, and the admiration for the strong females in my life -- I could think of nothing better to cultivate my talents and gifts I have acquired over the past four years, then to spend some time diving into six women's stories who have left me eager, excited, and even more curious for my own personal career path and future.

How are these women making the world a better place? I was going to find that out.

It is no secret that in many ways, women are at a disadvantage in society and in the workforce and have been for quite some time, proven by the fact that only just over 100 years ago did women gain the right to vote in politics and have a voice in society. Women are paid less and often held to a higher standard yet continue to produce great work and pave the way of history. Although times are changing, and improvements are being made, there is still work to be done. These women gave me a glimpse into their endurance and incredible accomplishments despite obstacles that women still face.

These women have opened up their personal homes and office spaces, sharing a piece of themselves that only they know best.

I hope throughout this multi-modal project you gain a snapshot into even half of the amazing trailblazers these women are.

Through this project I was able to utilize my passions and curious nature to ask questions, learn from my superiors, and highlight just a portion of the handful of talent located in Oxford, Mississippi.

From initial contact to following through with the interviews, these women have supported my vision of my project and were eager to allow me the honor of retelling some of their experiences.

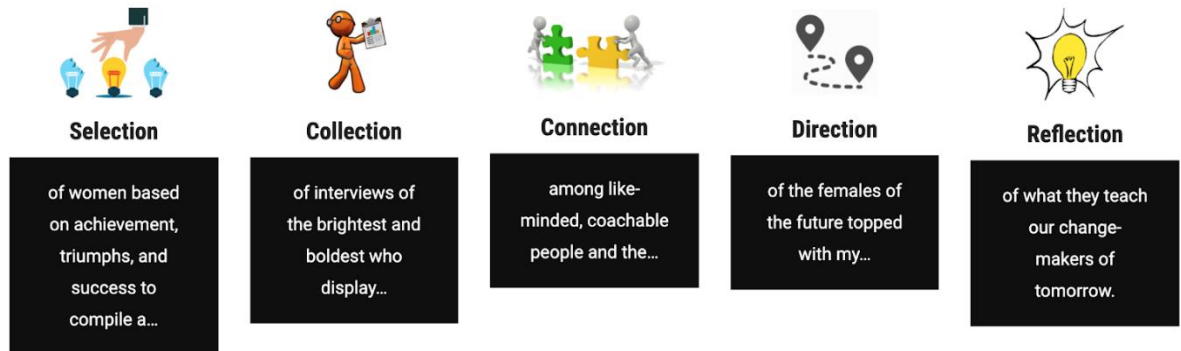
I hope this project inspires you, encourages you, and urges you to never lose faith of what you believe in. It certainly did for me.

Enjoy and be blessed!

Behind The Project:

“Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world.” -Hillary Clinton

FROM IDEA TO EXECUTION



What makes a good story? That is for you to decide. For me, a good story opens our hearts and minds, evokes emotions, cultivates curiosity, and leaves us with something more than what we came with.

Spending the past four years behind a camera searching for good stories, listening to my local community express emotions such as joy, anger, frustration, excitement, and many more, editing clips and soundbites, recording voice overs, and everything in between to bring a package to life, was all in hopes of creating a strong story and doing my subjects justice. Enlightening those in my community with the stories I strived to tell effectively.

It was impossible to conclude my four years at the University and not bring together my skills of visualizing, storytelling through a variety of mediums, and asking questions. Words contain so much power and are meant to be exchanged between person to person.

My thesis creation began when I approached Dr. Imre wanting to do something unconventional. I love writing, but there's a difference between journalism and a research paper. I wanted the opportunity to talk to real people. Dr. Imre was quick to jump on board and support me, and thus, the idea of a multimodal project blossomed, and we never looked back.

Given my background as shared in my introduction, I wanted to do stories on women in the local Oxford community and learn something new from each of them. With a background in broadcast journalism and Spanish, it was inevitable this project would start with an interview list and a camera. As I brainstormed and researched different influencers in the local community, I was made keenly aware of the abundance of talent in a small town with a population of 20,000, in Northern Mississippi. I used my

connections, networking skills, and ability to put myself out there without fear, to collect a list of women who I thought would have a powerful story to tell, and who would soon bring my project to fruition.

I began contacting each of the women setting up individual one-on-one meetings where I sat down and explained the vision of my project and why I wanted them to be a part of it. I listened to what they were willing to share and how they could be an asset, each providing unique insight in their own way. After confirming their willingness to participate, I left and went to formulate questions based on some of what they told me. We would reconnect a little while later, setting up the official on-camera interview where these women guided me through their backgrounds, how they got to where they are, and what their experiences as a woman in their field looked like.

One obstacle I did run into during my project was a lack of diversity in race, as I had five Caucasians females and only one African American female. I would like to have had a wider variety of females from different ethnicities and races to help broaden my understanding from a greater pool of perspectives. However, despite lacking diversity in ethnicity, I believe my project was rich in diversity of women in many other ways. I had a variety of women from different career paths, ages, backgrounds, experiences, interests, and perspectives. This variety helped me gain a more holistic and well-rounded understanding of a wide range of different types of successful women all within the same area code.

Also, I discovered quickly that successful people are busy accomplishing a wide variety of things. Tracing down these women was no easy task, but so rewarding and worth the adamant effort on my part, to find a small sliver of these women's time that they were willing to share with me. These women chose to participate out of the kindness of their hearts and belief in my project, not out of expectancy of anything in return. With this, I was very cautious with my time and why I made the extra upfront effort to explain my project, sharing my vision so they knew what they were committing to and were willing to give me the adequate time I needed to make this project a success all-around. This also helped me gain trust with my interviewees and comfortability when asking personal questions.

Prior to beginning any of my individual interviews, I had to have my interview questions approved by the International Review Board, better known as the IRB for short, since I was working with human subjects. I began each interview with a series of questions that was the same regardless of the woman I interviewed. Those interview questions included:

Can you briefly describe what a typical day for you may look like?

What is a fun fact about you?

What are 3 adjectives to describe yourself?

If you could have any job in the world what would it be and why?

If you had a piece of advice for women soon to enter the workforce what would it be?

Are there any changes you would like to see among women in the workforce?

Asking them all the same questions initially allowed me to compare similarities and differences between the women and simply to fulfill my own curiosity of their personal experiences. Then, based upon the woman, I asked a variety of questions much more specific to the story I was trying to tell including: a working mother, a woman in STEM, a first generation college student, a woman entrepreneur, a foreign-born woman, and a woman in the entertainment industry. This allowed the interview to be tailored to their specific experiences and speak to what they know best.

As with all technology and equipment, there is always the chance that you can have issues. Working on my own for all of these interviews was a challenge because I had to split my attention between the subject and ensure my interviews were being captured as best as possible. Working individually made this difficult because ideally, I would like to be able to focus solely on asking questions and connecting with my interviewee, but I was limited with that at times. It can be distracting for your subject when you are paying more attention to your equipment, adjusting lighting, audio, etc. Thankfully all of my subjects were so gracious and patient to allow me to work out as many kinks as possible. I shot with both my iPhone and a broadcast camera just in case one or the other stopped working, did not pick up audio, the battery died, etc. There were a few interviews I captured on the broadcast camera that were not salvageable because they were on a setting too high for my SD card without me knowing, and so it glitched throughout the entirety of my interview. Thankfully, I have my iPhone footage to still be able to save the interview and work with what I had, even if the quality was not as supreme. Also, I was having microphone issues during one interview, and realized afterwards it was due to a low battery and not the camera malfunctioning. In the life of a journalist, these are all normal occurrences that we always try to anticipate, and we just know we are going to have to be flexible and roll with the punches if something happens while we're on the scene shooting.

As always, there are some subjects you reach out to that you may not hear back from or are just simply unavailable with a packed schedule. Completely understandable, from someone who sometimes forgets to eat lunch running from class to meeting to back to class. If I had more time than just the three semesters I did, I would have loved to continue telling stories of even more women who are changemakers and trailblazers in and around Oxford. Likewise, there was only so much I could include in my project given my timeframe and limited nature being that it was just a one-man band project. However, I hope the retelling of these stories doesn't end with my project. I hope this is just the beginning. A catalyst to continue highlighting powerful females who may not be recognized in the ways this project was able to do so, very often.

Upon finishing my interviews, I would take the content and go back to begin editing. Listening to their words, pulling out and bringing to life their accomplishments, successes and failures, paths they took to be where they are today, that all cultivated into their own personal journeys. With the use of a multimodal website, I was able to tell the story through written words while supplementing stories with visual elements including pictures, pull quotes, and videos. This helps their page feel personal, and hopefully create

a sense of connection as if you were sitting down to have coffee with each of them, just as I did.

An issue with this project I faced was the lack of quality b-roll. Due to my limitations of time with each of the women and the wide and diverse things they do throughout their day, it was impossible to capture it all. Likewise, some of what they do is incredible work but may not necessarily be visually appealing. This is a content heavy project and my goal was to make it digestible and interesting for the viewer, however I had to work within the confines of the visual content I was able to accrue.

My most favorite part of the project was having the ability to sit down and have an open and honest conversation with each of the women. While most lasted only 30 to 45 minutes, I left each interview eager, excited, and wishing I had more time with each of them. I felt as though I could come back and talk to these women for hours about who they are as a person and why they are so special. Each of them left me with bounds of wisdom to take with me as I am soon to embark in my own personal career, myself.

Reflecting back and relistening to these women's words, I began to find much overlap in their pieces of advice, shared experiences as a woman in their role, etc. In my take-aways in my next section, I will share some of these with you. I quickly came to recognize the shared appreciation of hard work and the common trend of a path unfolding in front of you despite many unknowns.

I was able to hear about these women's families, their backstories, what drives them and makes them get up each morning excited to tackle the day and conquer the work ahead of them. I was able to see the multitude of versions of success as showcased through each of the six women I interviewed. While all very different and diverse, they each are able to reflect back and see how far they have come.

I can never repay these women for the knowledge they have bestowed on me, but I hope I can take it to heart, and pass it along to someone else down the road, just as they have done so for me.

Through the use of a multimodal website I was able to have a variety of components to retell their stories appropriately and effectively. I purchased my own URL and started my website from scratch using The Seven and WordPress. I wanted to keep the theme cohesive throughout, so I chose clean and legible fonts, just modifying colors and set-up to match the woman's personality and content I had created for them. Having never created my own website before, it was definitely a challenge and a learning process, but a very satisfying feeling as the pages started to come together and I could see all of my hard work and tireless hours of writing and editing, start to pay off. The business cards I created for each of the women each contain three adjectives on them, on a website called Canva where I used available templates, modifying pictures, colors, and fonts. These three adjectives were the words these women used to describe themselves when asked during their interviews. Some of them also include their written signature which I incorporated onto the card. I also was able to use Premiere Pro, an editing

software to create my videos along with an Adobe resource called, Spark, that allows you to create mini videos with textual elements along with it, that you see incorporated through all of the stories.

The website creation process was much like putting together a story by starting with a blank slate, brainstorming ideas, lots of trial and error, and eventually getting to look back and admire the work you have created for yourself and others to enjoy.

Assessing the project as I wind down with it, I think if I were to do this again, it would be beneficial given my time constrictions, to focus on fewer subjects with further in-depth stories. While I only did six stories, I would have loved the opportunity to spend more time with these women. While I am fortunate and thankful to have met each of them, built a connection and relationship, and am able to showcase the incredible women they are, I think fewer subjects would allow for a deeper analysis of the women and a more holistic understanding of who they are on a deeper level. I think this also would have allowed for the opportunity to talk to those closest to the subjects to further gain perspective on the person they are from an outside opinion who knows the subject well.

Likewise, I think this project done with a pair would also be very impactful. This allows for a deeper scope of perspectives in asking questions, shot techniques, networking connections, etc. While I made the most of what I had and hope to do each of my subject's justice, having someone else to bounce ideas off of or utilize different strengths is never a disadvantage.

A final change that I would have made looking back in retrospect was questions catered specifically towards personal obstacles, challenges, failures, and defeats. In my questions I addressed widely about women in the workforce as a whole, but neglected specific questions about failures, jobs they did not attain, awards they did not win, etc. I believe this would have aided in making the stories feel even more authentic and relatable.

Analysis:

It is hard to decide where to begin my focus on discussing the ample amount of things I learned while completing this project, not only about these incredible women and their raw stories, but also the variety of forms of success, the diversity within different fields, and ultimately the overlap and similarities I found between each of the women in their own way.

First and foremost, the power of vulnerability. Without these women's willingness to answer candidly and authentically, it would be impossible to learn and grow from them and create this project at all. Through their shared experiences, perspectives, visions, and goals, I was able to see the unlimited opportunity that we have if we are just willing to put in the effort, turn the key of the ignition to success, and hit the gas pedal. We must choose if we are going to be a person waving from the outside of a car driving by, or that person who is in the driver's seat, heading for something better.

Two words that resonated with me when reflecting on these women were dedication and sacrifice. All of them are extremely dedicated to their mission, bettering themselves and others, and committed to being successful. If they were not determined, it is unlikely these women would have soared to the heights they are at now. Likewise, their sacrifice and willingness to put something else before themselves, or willingness to prioritize their craft, their study, their work above all else, shapes the narrative of who they are and where they come from.

These women have everything from full-time careers, balancing children and work life responsibilities, philanthropic endeavors, founding's of their own organizations, an extensive list of accolades of achievements and awards, and the list could go on and on.

Each of these women showed me the amount of flexibility that they have had in their lives, adapting to changes, being willing to take risks, and the reward that comes from hard work and starting small.

Below I discuss some common themes that stuck out to me after conducting and relistening to each interview and I pulled out specific quotes from each that help demonstrate these key themes that I discovered throughout my project. These findings are strictly based on the content acquired from my interviews and do not incorporate additional pre-existing research on these themes. It is important to make note that there is pre-existing scientific research that may oppose or contradict some of these themes, but for the sake of this project, I reflected on how the interviewees responded to questions asked and not on online information.

#1 Men and Women are equipped differently

Time and time again throughout my series of interviews when I would ask questions catered towards obstacles these women may face in the workforce or barriers in their roles as women, I often heard responses back separating the different strengths and

weaknesses of men and women, and how we are biologically different, which is inevitably going to carry over into our roles.

“I’m not one of those that’s always like oh, poor me, I’m a woman. I just think everybody pulls their loads, everybody has their strengths and their weaknesses. I do think men and women are equipped differently. I think women are better problem solvers, and better multitaskers, and better prepared in a whole lot of situations to handle everything that’s thrown out at them. So, maybe I walk into a room with maybe a little bit too much confidence in that area, maybe I just don’t realize it sometimes, but there have been several situations where I have heard people say “that girl mayor”, and there was a time that I was a girl that that would’ve offended me, but now I’m like, well at least they didn’t say “that old woman mayor” so, it doesn’t offend me anymore. But, there have been some meetings where I’ve sensed in the room their lack of confidence in my ability or what have you, and that just really makes me dig in and demonstrate even more that women can lead with confidence and wisdom and with more compassion.”

-- Robyn Tannehill

“One of the things with women, we are different than men. We are more vulnerable with men. We are more emotional. We are more sympathetic. And, those are not things that should be seen as being weak. I mean this morning I came in this room crying. You know, it had just been a day. It had just been a weekend. And, that is 100% okay. That doesn’t mean that I’m not tough, that I’m not strong. It means that there are days that we have that are harder and days where you succeed and feel strong as hell. But you cannot be judged by that. It’s just who we are. It’s how we’re made up. It doesn’t mean that I can’t do the job of a man 10 times better than a man just because maybe one day I came in crying. We really do have to take that into account and move on, and not ever compare ourselves to somebody else in the workplace.”

-- Elizabeth Heiskell

“Stay confident in yourself because a lot of times especially if you’re going into a male dominated field, because you look different from everyone else or you have different interests or may come from a different background, that does not mean that your training or your abilities are any less and sometimes society makes you potentially feel differently, but I would just say stay true to yourself, stay confident in yourself, because you can absolutely do whatever the man in your field is doing.”

-- Nikki Reinemann

“I mean I just think you know the dynamics of a male and a female everyone says “Oh, they’re the same. They’re not”. Women, we have kids. I just think more businesses need to be open to providing a comfortable space for women to be successful. I just think that businesses should be more friendly when it comes to or more supportive when it comes to women in their careers, so that they’re able to do the same things that maybe their male counterparts can do.”

-- Yolett McPhee McCuin

#2 Work/Life Balance and Opportunities for Women with Children

I asked each of the women if there were any changes they would like to see among women in the workforce and three of the women responded with answers relating to women with children in the workforce and the necessity of creating equal opportunities for women in this regard. This was very interesting for me to hear about because I don't have children of my own and not being in the workforce yet, it was fascinating to hear this. I can relate from watching my mom as a single mother in the workforce, but that was only for one specific field, so it is interesting to see across the board in many fields the theme of women in the workforce reappearing.

Nikki Reinemann, a mother of two, wrote:

“Better access to a work life balance. So, a lot of women, especially in academia, those that are professors, they may put off having children until they get tenure or until they have been in their position for seven years or so, and a lot of times when that happens there already 40 years old, and for some that opportunity may have passed. Be more accommodating to being a woman in the workforce. That does not mean at all that we're gonna work any less or any differently -- but, to be able to have mothers' rooms for those that are breastfeeding, or paid maternity leave, or things like that. Because a lot of times when a male has a child in the STEM field they are celebrated -- ‘Wow, you're growing your family, that's awesome!’ but, in some cases, I have been extremely lucky that everyone has been super supportive of my situation but, a lot of times if a woman becomes pregnant when they're at work or if they're in graduate school or med school or whatever, it is seen as an inhibition instead of something to celebrate.”

Yolett McPhee McCuin, also a mother of two, wrote:

“I just think more businesses need to be open to providing a comfortable space for women to be successful. For example, just look in collegiate coaching, how many Universities provide in contracts daycare for kids? You know, I think that that's important if you really focus on having a female lead a women's program, then you should provide opportunities. I know daycare is something that's more important than anything when it comes to a mom that has their kids, just letting them know that you're okay with maternity leave, or whatever the case may be.”

Brandi Hephner LaBanc, has no children but saw the issue with her colleagues saying:

“I think it's very difficult for women with families, I mean I think we very much still have in our society this idea that women are going to be the lead caretaker. And, I do think we see that shifting, and again Higher Ed is the kind of place where also there's some more progressive thought around that and so, there's more likely you see some of that gender shifting which is great, but still I think that's what keeps so many women back. I mean, I don't have children so I don't know, and I never had the decision of, I'm not going to have children so I can go further in my career. I never made that decision. I made the decision not to have children. But because of that, I know that I have that advantage. I don't have to come home and pick up the kids and handle everything at night, it's just a different lifestyle. And so, particularly in my doctoral program, working alongside women that were juggling families I'm like, you are a superwoman. I don't

know how you do it. Now, obviously, the same can be said for a man that was doing those sorts of things but in my experience, that's not how the responsibilities have fallen out. I've just been fortunate that for me I've had a very supportive partner and have had the ability to be able to put myself into the work more, and that of course has allowed me to move up quickly in my professional experience, but I think there's certain things still, whether it's societally structured or it's gender choice, those sorts of things that are still keeping women from moving to those higher levels.

Robyn Tannehill, although a working mother, emphasized the need for women to women encouragement:

“I think the women in the workforce issue is certainly forefront now in discussions and conversations and pay equality and all those things I think are being talked about which is wonderful. The one thing probably that is not something that can be legislated but is critical is women supporting other women in the workplace. I am asked often to speak about my women mentors and I'm sorry to say I don't have many. I found the women when I worked in the advertising world and different other career paths to be the least encouraging honestly, and to feel like okay, only one woman is going to be considered for this promotion in a sea of men and feeling competitive rather than encouraging. So, if I could change anything about women in the workforce it would be 'Hey, you know the best way that you can impress your superiors and people that are watching you is to show what a supportive encourager you can be.' Kindness is a leadership skill and I would just encourage women to encourage other women.”

#3 Women Entering the Workforce

I asked each of the women if they had a piece of advice for women soon to enter the workforce and what that would be, and these four responses really stuck out to me. They each had simple suggestions that I think we often overlook or discredit. The common theme between each of these is the power of taking advantage of where you are at this current moment, being your authentic self, and being unafraid to start small and work your way up. We do not start at the top, so we must be willing to start from the beginning, learn from our superiors, and progress as we build and grow.

“Take advantage of every opportunity. Know that you are developing skills in whatever job it is -- even if you think this is a temporary reception position, this is a temporary waitressing position, this is a temporary fill in the blank position, you know it's not your life's dream or your career goal -- there is something you can take away from every one of those jobs. Whether it is developing a better appreciation and sense of dealing with the public, some computer skills that you might not have but are great resume builders for you, and just that interaction with whatever category of business that you're working in. You never know if you're in marketing and you start learning about different businesses - - coffee shops and what have you that you work in, that might lead to you having a different career path. And, certainly don't just write things off as this is just for this moment, I've got bigger and better things to do. Take advantage of where you are.”

-- Robyn Tannehill

“Don't sell yourself short. You know, I just think we're in a society that's male dominated, now the good thing about it is in 2020-2019, the last decade, there has been a lot of movements to normalize women being in power and to bring it to light when there are deficiencies, and so I think this is really a good time to be a female. And, so we can't sell ourselves short. You're getting into the workforce, you have to go after something if you want it, you have to be free and not fearful to negotiate the number that you think you deserve as far as salary is concerned. My mantra is “no ceilings”. You can't have a limit on what you want to do. If you must start small and not make anything in order to move up the ranks, then that's what you need to be prepared to do. I think sometimes males are just more apt to take any job, anywhere, you know I'm just gonna go after it and make it happen and I think I was one of those women who just said, you know what, I'll take that job that'll pay me \$260 bucks every two weeks just to get started, and it has positioned me to be where I'm at today.”

-- Yolett McPhee McCuin

You can study in so many different areas but always feel that there's some kind of passion, some kind of “I can do this every day, not dread doing it every day, do it every day.” Oprah said, “Do what you have to do, so you can do what you want to do.” And, I appreciate and respect that because you gotta work tough, I did that, trust me. I mean I started my performing career doing five shows, six days a week, at Six Flags. That was my first paying job as a performer, making minimum wage, and I was 17 years old. So, you know, I put in my time and I learned my craft.

-- Mary Haskell

“I think the first thing is show up. For me, I've learned that you're in the role because you've earned it, and so now show up in the role. I think too often, because of societally how we all have been, and it's not a bad thing and I think generationally that will change, but for me it was always to wait and listen to others. And just the messages I heard all my life made me kind've step back sometimes. And I'm not saying bulldoze your way into meetings or bulldoze your way into moments but it's about just showing up and being you and bring your perspective because it's really valuable. And it's really, really important because you don't have to agree. In fact I think it's better when teams and groups don't agree because we come up with better solutions, we come up with better questions when we're thinking about things and debating it, not just when we're all nodding our heads and getting along. So, that would be the first thing is really show up. And then, trust yourself. I think again, it's the sense of feeling like you have to fit in, feelings you like have to conform in a sense, and I don't mean go in and be the odd duck or do really strange things. I mean, just be yourself and trust that that's why you're there. I mean that's exactly what folks saw and why they invited you in to be in that role and be in that moment. So, I think that's really important. And then the other thing is that leadership is not defined by position. I think it's so important to remember that your leadership can be exercised at any time. And I think the more you can demonstrate that, that's when you end up in positions. But leadership is not defined by that. You can lead from any position, in any role, in any aspect of your life, and what you need to do is lead where you feel most passionate and that goes back to trusting yourself and the showing up piece.”

-- Brandi Hephner LaBanc

“I think one of the most important things when you are entering the workforce is to remember that you want to work in that environment like your name is on the door. Let’s say for example you work at Dillard’s. When you walk in there, you need to look at that Dillard’s sign and put your name on it in your head, and then walk in the doors. And if you work like that, you would be the best employee that anybody could ever have, because you are going to take care of the little things. If you see a piece of trash, guess what, you’re going to pick it up and throw it away, because that’s your store. It doesn’t matter what job it is, whether you are pumping gas, drive through at McDonald’s, if you work like that, it won’t be long til you’re climbing up the ladder, until you are in a position where you are at top level.”

-- Elizabeth Heiskell

#4 Early Bird Gets the Worm

A common theme I heard between these six women was they rise early and start their grind, but allow time to be set aside for themselves, the majority stating they get up in the mornings and either meditate or workout.

Elizabeth Heiskell said she wakes up at 5am to go to yoga at 5:30 to begin her day. Yolett McPhee-McCuin said she wakes up at 6am to begin her day with meditation and then working out at 6:30am. Brandi Hephner LaBanc begins her day at 6:30am walking her dog and doing a workout.

It was evident each woman has her own routine that works for her specific success but a priority on mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health was evident in order for these women to reach their full potential and accomplish what they hoped to in the day.

Likewise, no one day looks alike for these women. None of these jobs are monotonous and follow the same routine day in and day out, and for the majority that’s why they love their job so much.

“Every day is different, especially in higher education. The one constant is that whatever I plan in the morning will not happen because somethings gonna dish the day, and that's okay.”

-- Brandi Hephner LaBanc

“A typical day for me is totally dependent upon what time zone I find myself in.”

-- Mary Haskell

“That’s the reason honestly that I have been in the catering business for so long is because it’s different every day, If I had to go to a job and do the same thing every single day, I think I would be just absolutely miserable.”

-- Elizabeth Heiskell

“Well, that’s one of the things I enjoy most about my job is there's just not really a typical day. They are all really different. It just kind’ve depends on the season and if anybody acts crazy that day.”

-- Robyn Tannehill

This explains why these women are such movers and shakers being that each new day brings new opportunities and new challenges to tackle. Thus, this makes sense why when I asked the majority of these women what a typical day looked like in their shoes; their first response was usually to laugh.

#5 The power that comes from listening and being a life-long learner.

Having the ability to spend anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours with these women, it allowed me to broaden my horizons, gain invaluable knowledge as I am soon to embark into my own career, and the value that comes from networking and learning from those who come before us. We must be willing to learn from our mistakes and others’ mistakes, acknowledge when we are at fault, and keep moving forward. Each of these women showcased that success is not defined by your title, where you went to school, or even the salary you earn, but by your willingness to think differently, to be adaptable to what each new day brings, and an openness to new ideas and thoughts.

While there is still work to be done for women in the workforce, as many of these women have showcased, we are making great strides. Women are breaking out of societal molds, using their voices, offering a unique perspective, and claiming their stake at the table. I hope this project, even if only in a small way, helps to advance the progress of women’s success and ability to continue accomplishing amazing things for the world around us.

#6 Mentors! Mentors! Mentors!

My final takeaway and perhaps the most empowering for me, was the great need of finding strong, reliable, and encouraging mentors. Both male and female mentors, and oftentimes not so surprisingly to me, the majority of these women’s mentors were male. Women have a very competitive nature and oftentimes we are known for beating each other down instead of building ourselves up. Each woman that I sat down with mentioned a mentor at least once over the course of our interview, whether the impact their mentor had on them, the need for strong mentors, or how they are a mentor themselves.

“I think even for women, it’s so important to have that male balance to empower too in your life. I just think that it’s important to have both sides. You know, strong women, but men too, to say hey, you can do it too. Because they are the top of the food chain, and some of my greatest mentors are males, that understand the importance of having a female perspective and not looking at me as lesser than. Just allowing me to come into the space and respecting me as a colleague, as whatever space I’m in, just respecting me in that light, and I appreciate it.”

-- Yolett McPhee-McCuin

Coach Yo also continued to say:

“I think that we try to complicate success and what that looks like, but when you talk to successful people, and you study them, the recipe is pretty simple,” she said. “They’re just coachable and disciplined. I think although that seems small, it’s a big factor. Successful people are people who have great mentors and their mentors give them advice, and they follow it.”

“The one thing probably that is not something that can be legislated but is critical is women supporting other women in the workplace. I am asked often to speak about my women mentors and I’m sorry to say, I don’t have many.”

-- Robyn Tannehill

“I was very fortunate to find the mentor in the atmosphere that I did at Vanderbilt, which was the graduate school that I went to, and so I got in a lab with a very supportive advisor who also had small children so he understood if daycares closed, or my kid got sick, or anything like that which was really fantastic, and even in that same institution if I had potentially worked for somebody else I may not have had that experience. So, you have to be cognizant of who you are going to be working for, who’s gonna influence how you get through that process.”

-- Nikki Reinemann

“For me, I think a big shift in what was really interesting was moving to the South. My mentor, is an African American man, and he and a few others in my life, well the two key ones, both were African American men, both from the South, and they kept saying, ‘this is something you’re going to need to be aware of, and don’t be bothered by it, but just understand that there’s a different social context and that you’ll have to navigate that differently.’ Not really thinking these are underrepresented individuals giving me advice as another underrepresented individual in the field.”

Likewise, many of the women shared how they are mentors to others in their own way today.

“When I was asked to join the [Women’s] Council in its 4th year or so, I was not only providing scholarships, of course I was a scholarship student in the music department so that meant a lot to me, but we on top of that understand the importance of mentorship, because if you’re not growing the next generation of philanthropists, if you’re not growing the next generation of excited, young adults going out into the world appreciating the pay it forward, and that’s not mine, that’s an entire book and movie that was kind’ve covered a decade ago, but it’s a real thing. If a scholar graduates college and is not only filled with their own dreams and making their own way, but also, how can I make the way better, how can I help my community, then we’re building a better state of Mississippi, a better country, and ultimately helping the world I think.”

-- Mary Haskell

“Probably one of the things I am most passionate about is finding ways to encourage and mentor young girls. So, they know at a very young age that the sky’s the limit. And

probably my favorite thing that I get to do is a 5th grade girls leadership class -- Girl EmPOWERment. I think if I could lead a girls leadership program that was bigger than just our one school -- I wish there were more hours in the day -- so that I could now.”

--Robyn Tannehill

“Just the fact that I have the opportunity to impact young people on a daily basis, and not only young women but, people that I come into contact with. It’s really my mission to teach, develop, and inspire. Glad and blessed to be able to do that every single day,” she said.

-- Coach Yo

This was so important to me because it resonated with me as I reflected on the men and women who have served as mentors to me and helped me get to where I want to be. Particularly in our world today, it is all about connections and who you know, so the value of mentors and those who can help push you to the next level are even more critical. Whether your mentor is just like you or complete opposite, the power of having someone to confide in to help you when you feel defeated, give you advice when you need it most, or just be a listening ear, is irreplaceable and beyond valuable, and something I think all women and men alike whether soon to enter the workforce or those who have been a part of it for a long time, need to work to have in their lives.

Women In Mississippi:

In order to fully culminate my thesis project, I did some supplemental research online to understand the state that women in the workforce are currently in within the state of Mississippi, and the local Oxford community to fully capture where we as women are now, and where we hope to one day be. It is inspiring to see how all of these women, despite these statistics, continue to find success in their own ways and continue to break boundaries despite many of the set-backs women in the workforce face.

The gender pay gap and earnings for females as correlated with the overall statistics of the United States, are significantly lower than their male counterparts.

Some of the most substantial differences are showcased through the following statistics.

Women in Mississippi typically earn 75 cents to every dollar a man earns. This is seven cents less than the national average of women earning 82 cents for every dollar a man earns (National Women's Law Center).

In 2017, the average salary in Mississippi for a man was \$52,323 while for a woman it was \$36,636. This means for full-time male employees; they are earning 1.43 times more than female employees (Data USA).

It is no secret that Mississippi is also one of the most poverty-stricken states in the United States. 19.8% of women live in poverty, which is significantly higher than the national figure of 12% nationwide (National Women's Law Center).

This also closely corresponds with the high percentage of women without access to health insurance. 18.4% of Mississippi women, in the age considered the reproductive years, ages 19-54, 18.4% are uninsured. Nationally, the percentage is much lower with 11.9% uninsured (National Women's Law Center).

Despite many of these hardships that show clear signs of improvements that need to be made, there are signs of progression and women continuing to pave a way of their own.

Within the local Oxford community, of 105 Brick and Mortar stores in the historic, downtown area better known as "The Square," 52% of them are owned by women including different boutiques, restaurants, and shops (Schnugg).

Additionally, the University of Mississippi, during the 2018-2019 school year, 611 faculty members were men while only 494 faculty members were female. These numbers account for both part-time and full-time workers (The University of Mississippi).

Yet interestingly enough, opposite of the faculty, during the same academic school year, there were 9,041 male students and 11,233 female students. Thus, indicating a significant portion more of females who are attending the University compared to their male counterparts (The University of Mississippi).

Continuing with education overall in the state, in 2015, approximately only 21.6% of females within Mississippi held a bachelor's degree or Higher. While this number is low, this is up nearly five percentage points from the year 2000 (Status of Women in the States).

So, it is no secret that Mississippi is making strides in the right direction, while still more changes are necessary. It is exciting to see the gradual shift towards more women who are college educated, higher enrollment numbers for women than men, and more women owning their own businesses within the Oxford Community.

It is my hope that women continue to defy the statistics and are able to go and become everything they aspire to be. It is evident that is what these six women were able to do. We are strong and we are capable.

WOMEN IN MISSISSIPPI

statistics to know

These facts are a culmination pulled from a variety of online sites, and the sources are listed below each fact.

PAY GAP

Women in Mississippi typically make **\$0.75** for every dollar paid to men. The national figure is **\$0.82**.

National Women's Law Center

POVERTY

19.8% of women in Mississippi live in poverty. The national figure is **12.0%**.

National Women's Law Center

UNIVERSITY EMPLOYMENT

In 2018-2019, the University of Mississippi had **611 Male Faculty** and **494 Female Faculty**.

Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning

UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT

In 2018-2019, the University of Mississippi had **9,041 Male Students** and **11,233 Female Students**.

Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning

AVERAGE SALARY

In 2017,
Male Salary: \$52,323
Female Salary: \$36,636
Full-time Male Employees made **1.43 times more** than female employees.

Census Bureau

EDUCATION

In 2015, **approximately 21.6%** of women held a Bachelor's Degree or higher in Mississippi, an increase of about 5 percentage points since 2000.

Institute of Women's Policy Research

OWNERSHIP ON THE SQUARE

The downtown Historic Square in Oxford, consists of **105** locally-owned brick and mortar businesses, and **52%** are owned by women.

HottyToddy.com

HEALTH INSURANCE

18.4% of women aged 19-54 in Mississippi are uninsured. Nationally, **11.9%** are uninsured.

National Women's Law Center



Meet

THE WOMEN

- 6** unique perspectives and fields represented
- 3** Ole Miss graduates
- 120+** combined years of career experience
- 1** woman born abroad
- 11** total degrees earned
- 12** children between five mothers



Dr. Brandi Hephner LaBanc, better known as BHL, serves as the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. BHL was a first-generation college student who has risen through the ranks of higher education. She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Akron in accounting, her master's degree in Higher Education Administration and Student Personnel from Kent State University, and her doctoral degree at Northern Illinois University in Adult and Higher Education. BHL has served in numerous administrative roles at Universities including: Arizona State, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Baldwin-Wallace College, University of Akron, and the University of Mississippi. BHL resides with her husband Dave, and their Doberman pinscher in Massachusetts. A fun fact about BHL is her grandfather was a professional clown and she did "clowning" with him growing up.

Link to Hephner LaBanc's Page for Video Elements:

http://mstrailblazers.com/?page_id=6

First Generation College Student to a seat on Senior Leadership

From first generation college student to current Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Brandi Hephner LaBanc has gone far in the education realm.

“For me, I remember we had a bulletin board in our school, and they would highlight the folks that were going to college and where they were going, and there were never more than maybe fifteen to twenty names every year,” Hephner LaBanc said. “So, in my mind, going to college was all about getting my name on the bulletin board outside the counselors office.”

She was a first-generation college student whose parents thought college was expensive and were adamant she should pay for her educational endeavors.

“Having those conversations [about college] with my parents, their whole thing was, “If you are gonna go, it’s gonna cost us a lot of money, so basically go get a degree where you can get a job,” Hephner LaBanc said. “They wanted to make sure I was done in four years, and I had a job and I would make money to be able to pay for myself and handle it.”

Hephner LaBanc successfully graduated in four years from the University of Akron with an undergraduate degree in accounting. She began her career but never felt happy or fulfilled and decided to return to school for a graduate degree in student affairs.

“An advisor, a student affairs professional, sat down with me to talk through what I was doing, and she was the one that said, ‘Why don’t you do [student affairs]? You were really involved in college’, Hephner LaBanc said. “That was just kind’ve how I found my way in college, was just to do things, meet people, get engaged. I’m an introvert by nature so that wasn’t even easy, but it was a survival tactic, as a first-generation student.” Today in her current role, Hephner LaBanc deals with many of the things she never participated in college.

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It’s kind of incredible to go from literally not even knowing how to sign up for orientation to being in charge of that now.

“It’s kind of incredible to go from literally not even knowing how to sign up for orientation to being in charge of it now,” she said.

As Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, she fulfills a variety of different roles and every day is different.

“The one constant is that whatever I plan in the morning, will not happen because something is gonna dish the day, and that’s okay. That is part of the world of student affairs, responding to students’ needs, or crises that come up, and things like that,” Hephner LaBanc said.

Speaking engagements are a part of her job as a senior leader at a large institution, which can sometimes be difficult for someone who is an introvert.

“I have no issue with talking, it’s just that I have to be much more prepared to talk or to go into certain circumstances, so I feel more confident about that. When I do speak, particularly when I have to give speeches, I know that I’m going to need some alone time then and be able to regroup.” Hephner LaBanc said.

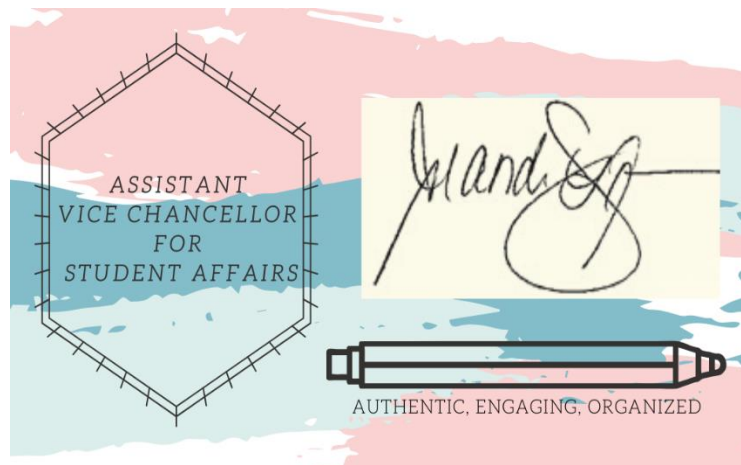
Dave LaBanc, Hephner LaBanc’s husband, said her many talents make her so successful at what she does.

“She is one of the most professional people I know,” Dave LaBanc said. “One of the most competent, the most astute. She’s highly intelligent, she’ll never take credit for it, but she is. She cares for people deeply. She is probably the hardest worker I know.”

Despite Hephner LaBanc being a woman in senior leadership, she’d like to continue to see women like herself fill those roles.

“I just feel like any team I’ve been on where there’s been more balance, whether it’s from gender, or other diversity, it’s just more effective. There’s just a better perspective, and you think about problems and solutions in a more dynamic way. I see a lot of good in that, but I think there has to be more change socially and structurally for that to occur more equitably,” she said.

Hephner LaBanc has worked for a variety of institutions, including the University of Mississippi, where she served prior to accepting her new job in the same role in Massachusetts in December. When LaBanc is not busy at work or in meetings, teaching classes, or engaging with students, she enjoys spending time with her Doberman pinscher and traveling with her husband Dave.





Dr. Nikki Reinemann, a native of Batesville, Mississippi, currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Biomedical Engineering and Affiliate Professor of Chemical Engineering at the University of Mississippi. Reinemann attended the University of Mississippi for her undergraduate career where she earned degrees in both Chemical Engineering and Chemistry prior to attending Vanderbilt University to earn her PhD in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering. Reinemann is married and has two children, including a newborn! A fun fact about Reinemann is that she now works at her Alma Mater and has enjoyed getting to see the University both as a student and as an employee!

Link to Reinemann's Page for Video Elements:
http://mstrailblazers.com/?page_id=670

*Only Female on Biomedical Engineering Staff
doesn't stop Reinemann from overachieving*

A mother, wife, professor, and on top of all of these roles, a scientist. Nikki Reinemann is an affiliate assistant professor of Chemical Engineering at the Biomedical Engineering Department at the University of Mississippi. From the time she was a little girl, she knew that a career in the science field was in her future.

“When I was little I always watched the PBS specials, Bill Nye the Science Guy and all that good stuff, I just thought it was really cool and then, when I got into high school I was really interested in chemistry and math,” she said.

Originally from Batesville, Reinemann was born and raised in Mississippi. She graduated with dual degrees in Chemical Engineering and Chemistry from the University of Mississippi. She continued her education at Vanderbilt University where she earned a Doctoral degree in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering in 2018. Through her studies, she fell in love with research, and quickly realized this is what she is meant to do in her life.

“Once I got into college and started doing research in a lab, I realized what research was, and fell even more in love with it,” Reinemann said. “You know this sense of discovery, the sense of doing something that no one else has done, is really rewarding.”

In her role as a professor, one of the biggest responsibilities she has is running a molecular, biophysics and engineering lab where her students look at proteins that make human bodies do certain things such as contract muscles. She says her job is a dream come true.

“I have always had an interest in science and math and I always thought that research, whatever research meant, was really cool, you could do something that’s gonna help somebody,” Reinemann said.

While she loves her job, she says being a woman in STEM is not easy. She was the only female in her cohort of 10 students during her Ph.D. program, and now she is the only woman in her department.

“In just about every STEM situation I have been in, I have pretty much been the only woman and so, I guess I'm used to it at this point,” Reinemann said. “It took a lot of soul searching to figure out how to be confident and stay true to myself, and it was a learning process, but it has made me a much stronger individual.”



It took a lot of soul searching to figure out how to be confident and stay true to myself, and it was a learning process but, it has made me a much stronger individual.

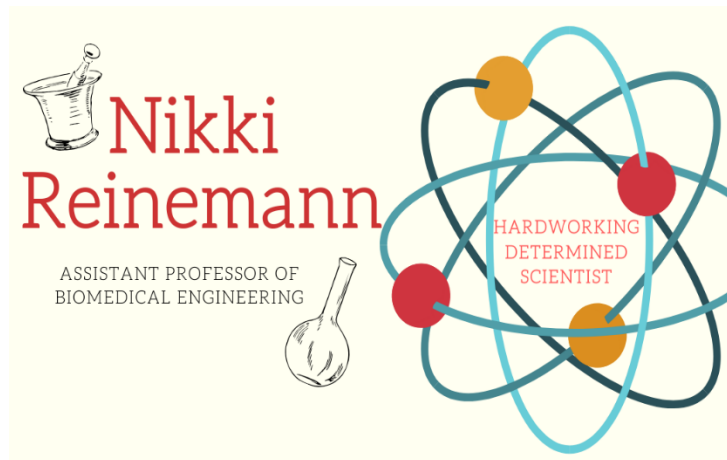
She said working in a very male-dominated field has its set of advantages and disadvantages.

“Because women are an underrepresented minority in just about any STEM field, you *do* get targeted more for different opportunities. One of the buzzwords in STEM is diversity so, trying to find more diverse non-white, non-male people to participate in STEM, whether it’s actually going out into the workforce or going into academia. So, I’m not going to say that it hasn’t helped in some opportunities,” Reinemann said.

At the beginning of her career she struggled with confidence, and she felt like she had no idea what she was doing.

“But then it turns out, ‘Oh gee, everyone else is having the same struggles that I am, we just needed to talk about it’ and so, I learned as long as I can communicate with the others that I am working with, even if they’re all other males, 99% of the time, we all have something in common,” she said.

Reinemann is married, has two children, and currently resides in Oxford. She plans to continue developing the work in her lab with her students at her Alma Mater, when she is not busy at home caring for her newborn and young son.





Mary Haskell, a native of Beaumont, Texas, attended the University of Mississippi where she majored in Music Education and Vocal Performance. While attending Ole Miss, Haskell was crowned Miss University and Miss Mississippi, which was how she met her husband, who was the current Pageant Director at the time. Haskell began her career as a singer at Six Flags over Texas in the Summers she was out of school and moved to Los Angeles shortly after graduation. From the time she was a little girl, Haskell has had a love for singing, dancing, and performing. She has starred in numerous movies, released her own albums, and when she is not busy performing or spending time with her children and grandchildren, she supports various philanthropy groups including the Ole Miss Women's Council. A fun fact about Haskell is that her very first date in college was Sam Haskell, who is now her husband, and until it went out of business, the couple would celebrate their anniversary each year where they went on their first date September 17th, 1976, the Pizza Hut on Jackson Avenue.

Link to Haskell's Page for Video Elements:
http://mstrailblazers.com/?page_id=671

Music to Movies, a performer through and through

Retired actress, singer, and songwriter Mary Haskell always had a passion for music, and growing up in Beaumont, a small town outside of Houston, Texas, she was one of the loudest voices in the cherub church choir.

“You know, [a voice] where you didn’t need a microphone, you could hit the back of the hall with, as we say, your pipes as your instrument. I’ve really just been a part of music my whole life,” said Haskell.

She realized music would be her career when she auditioned as a 17-year-old for a summer performing job at Six Flags Over Texas.

“I was getting paid minimum wage, probably seven dollars an hour, to crank out five shows a day, six days a week, and yet I loved every minute of it,” she said.

After this summer, Haskell’s passion for music soared and she realized it was what she wanted to study. So, in 1976 Haskell came to Ole Miss to pursue a degree in Music Education and Vocal Performance.

“There was no musical theater major,” Haskell said. “If there was, I probably would’ve seriously considered it. But, at that point in time in the 70’s, you either chose theater, which was acting, or you chose music. And of course, my DNA is music.”

From the beginning, she immersed herself into the music world including auditioning for a prestigious song and dance group on campus called, “The Group.” It was during the audition that she met her husband, Sam Haskell, whom she married 38 years ago.

“I heard this, “Oh My Gosh!” I was like, How rude! Who is that!?,” she said. “Of course, it turned out to be this young man named Sam Haskell who came up and said, ‘You’re amazing. You’re going to make this group. They’d be crazy not to cast you.’”

While at Ole Miss, Haskell placed both as Miss University and Miss Mississippi and competed for Miss America, claiming the performance part throughout all of the competitions were her very favorite parts.

“I adored coming back home and serving as Miss Mississippi,” Haskell said. “A lot of times people want to just win the crown and be done with it, but honestly the year I served, was the year I really fell in love with the state and why I eventually moved back.”

After graduating, Haskell briefly performed in Dallas, Texas before landing a spot in

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I know the odds were certainly against me
to go out there and say,
I want to sing and dance and act,
and that it actually happens,
and actually make a living at it.

Disneyland as a dancer and a singer at the Golden Horseshoe Saloon.

“I know the odds were certainly against me to go out there and say, I want to sing and dance and act, and that it actually happens, and actually made a living at it,” she said. “I do realize and appreciate the rarity of that.”

Ten years later, Sam and Mary wanted to have children, and Haskell realized it was time to take a step back from performing.

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Life here is so much more at ease,
the community, the spirit, the
warmth, the pace, it’s so lovely.

“I was working and touring and I knew there was just no way I was gonna leave the house and go to a theater six nights a week with babies at home, so I naively thought, well I’ll just do television, how hard can that be?” she recalls.

She debuted in her first series at the time called Sisters. Not only has Haskell performed on stage and television but she also has

recorded four albums, which she only began at the age of 50. Now, Haskell splits her time between Los Angeles and Oxford. She loves the slower pace of life in Oxford compared to Los Angeles.

“Life here is so much more at ease, the community, the spirit, the warmth, the pace, it’s so lovely,” she said.

Even though Haskell is retired, she is staying active and giving back to her community in a variety of ways including helping the Ole Miss theater department, serving as a member of the Ole Miss Women’s Council, helping at First Presbyterian Church, the Food Pantry, and many others. She believes that women giving back to their community is in their DNA.

“It is that thing in our nature that makes us want to nurture,” Haskell said. “If you have children you do it there, but whether if you have children or not, we tend to be wired in the workplace, wired in this world of ours, to see a problem, see a need, and want to step in.”

But, even with the magic of Oxford where she attended school, she knows there is always something exciting waiting for her back in LA.

“Although we call Oxford home, we still have work, family, and of course, three grandsons ages 2, 4, and 6, who live in LA and as they say, where the grandchildren are, you shall be also,” Haskell said.





Born and raised in the Mississippi Delta, **Elizabeth Heiskell** is the owner of Elizabeth Heiskell Catering, runs Woodson Ridge Farms, has written several cookbooks, and stars as a guest chef on the Today Show. Heiskell attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York which she says was a drastic cultural shock for her. She said pimento cheese is foreign in New York and she used to have to pack grits and Crisco in her suitcase when she left home! Heiskell has always had a love for cooking and began in the catering business at a young age working for a Memphis catering company in high school. After having her first child, she started her own business “Instead of Flowers” out of her kitchen 24 years ago, where she prepared food for monumental moments which eventually turned into catering. A fun fact about Heiskell is she has four dogs, two cats, and three children.

Link to Heiskells’s Page for Video Elements:
http://mstrailblazers.com/?page_id=13

A Love for Cooking Translated to Life-long Career in Catering

Elizabeth Heiskell starts her mornings at 5 a.m. with practicing yoga and cooking breakfast for her two children before school. While owning her own business and being a cookbook author, she juggles the responsibility of being a mom of three children, a wife to her husband, and being her own boss.

“I head to the kitchen, we start working on menus, dealing with a lot of clients, and start cooking usually from about 9:30am to 3:30 in the afternoon,” Heiskell said. Heiskell founded Elizabeth Heiskell Catering Company in Oxford, Mississippi over 20 years ago. Her catering company specializes in Southern Comfort cooking and is well-known for her infamous Bloody Mary mix, made with home-grown tomatoes from their own Woodson Ridge Farms.

She began her catering career in high school, assisting her mom’s friend in Memphis who owned a catering company, and continued helping throughout college.

“You know it’s funny, [catering] is the only thing I have ever done,” Heiskell said. It’s the reason that all this [Elizabeth Heiskell Catering] got started, and it’s really where I find a tremendous amount of satisfaction.” Elizabeth Heiskell Catering does just about anything and everything you can think of when it comes to food preparation.

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Catering really is the bread and butter of what we do here. I mean it is my most favorite thing.

“Catering really is the bread and butter of what we do here,” Heiskell said. I mean it is my most favorite thing. We service all types of clients. We do big, wonderful, over-the-top weddings, we do small intimate weddings, we do dinners at the Chancellor’s home at the University, we do lots of tailgating and sporting events, we do private dinner parties, and engagement parties. There’s absolutely nothing that we won’t do. We love every facet of it.”

The wide variety of work and constant change is one of Heiskell’s very favorite parts of what she does.

“That’s the reason honestly that I have been in the catering business for so long, because it’s different every day,” she said.

“If I had to go to a job and do the same thing every single day, I think I would be just absolutely miserable. But with this, if it’s a different week, if it’s a different party, it’s a different client, and it’s just incredibly exciting and keeps me engaged.”

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Heiskell has always loved cooking and she says the first thing she ever cooked was popovers.

“I begged my mom to go and buy me the popover pans. I don't even know where we found them, but I guess maybe they were very popular in the 80's. So, we bought the popover pans, I made the popovers and the strawberry butter, and it was just so satisfying,” she said.

Heiskell attended the Culinary Institute in New York before returning home to Mississippi to begin her first business, “Instead of Flowers”.

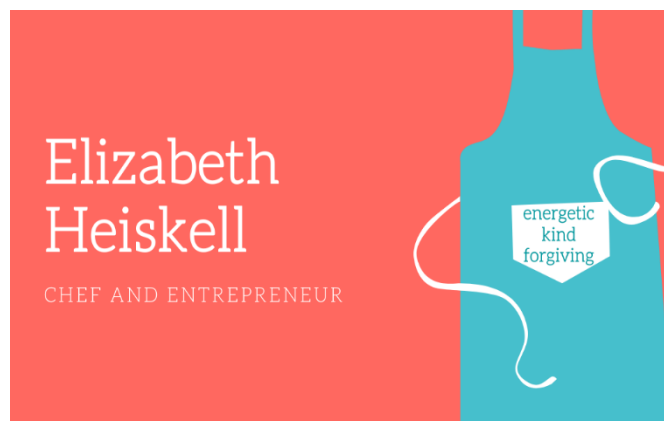
“I could do it out of my kitchen,” Heiskell said. “So basically, if somebody died or had a baby then I would take food. It was just a great way for me to be creative, and be in the kitchen, and then that very quickly turned into catering, almost immediately, so that's really how it started about 24 years ago.”

In addition to catering, Heiskell writes cookbooks has written four cookbooks, with her fourth one debuting in October.

“It's called “Come On Over”, and it's a book about celebrating every day,” Heiskell said. “Whether it's a weeknight or even making school lunches for your kids, making that special. We cannot wait for that.”

Heiskell is also planning to appear on the Today Show as a guest chef and she is helping with the launch of the new Food Network Application. Despite these big plans, she says her small town business is her priority.

“It's just like one big family and we really do feel the love and support,” Heiskell said. “It's wonderful to have so many friends that are in this small town that rely on you to help with their weddings, or their children's birthday parties, or that want us to do fun cooking classes and things,” she said.”





Yolett McPhee-McCuin, better known as Coach Yo, currently serves as the Head Coach of the Lady Rebels women's basketball team. Born in Freeport, Bahamas, Coach Yo was the first Bahamian woman to sign a Division I letter of intent to play basketball. Coach Yo began her collegiate and athletic career in the United States, playing her first two years at Miami-Dade Community College and continuing on to Rhode Island, where she earned her degree in Business Management and Administration in 2004 and later went on to earn her Master's Degree in Physical Education from Arkansas-Pine Bluff. Upon graduating from Rhode Island, Coach Yo began her collegiate coaching career including stops at Clemson, Pittsburgh, Portland, Frank Phillips College, Arkansas-Bine Bluff, and now Ole Miss. Coach Yo is the first Bahamian women to coach at a Division I program and the first black female head coach in Ole Miss women's basketball history. A fun fact about Coach Yo is when she's not busy with her season and two, young kids and has some free time, she binge watches Chicago PD with her husband and loves playing games on her PlayStation.

Link to McPhee McCuin's Page for Video Elements:
http://mstrailblazers.com/?page_id=689

A History-Maker, In More Ways Than One

Yolett McPhee McCuin has a long list of impressive accolades in addition to the fact that she is a full-time working mother, has been an African American female coach for over 15 years, and was born in another country. McPhee McCuin is the first African American female to coach at the University of Mississippi. She was born in the Bahamas and has deep appreciation for her country.

“It’s just been a journey,” McPhee McCuin said. “Some ups, some downs. But really thankful for my roots and the Bahamian people are very prideful people. We work very hard.”

McPhee McCuin came to America on a scholarship to play college basketball in 2000 when she became the first Bahamian woman to sign a Division I scholarship straight out of high school.

“I’ve had all these experiences just because of this 28.5 weighted ball, and no student loans because of it. That’s pretty much how I got where I’m at, just working my way through the fields and using basketball as my gateway,” McPhee McCuin said.



I’ve had all these experiences just because of this 28.5 weighted ball, and no student loans because of it. That’s pretty much how I got where I’m at, just working my way through the fields and using basketball as my gateway.

“I signed in November and I ended up going to Florida Atlantic University to start my collegiate career, and I didn’t go on any other visits, I didn’t understand the process. They asked me if I wanted to come, I said yeah, and ended up moving to the United States,” she said.

McPhee McCuin credits her parents for her success. Her mother is a principal and her father coached high school basketball. Although her parents never pressured her to play a sport, they did push for something else.

“My parents just wanted me to be passionate about something and go after it and I was always around sports, I guess I couldn’t escape it,” McPhee McCuin said. “I’ve played every single sport.”

That passion translated to McPhee McCuin’s belief that sports provide certain skills that few other things are able to, particularly for young women.

“I think that’s important too for young women, for them to play a sport,” McPhee McCuin said. “No matter if you’re not good at it or anything, because it teaches you toughness, resilience, it teaches you how to work with different people, community.”

In addition to her supportive parents, she credits her experience of coming to the United States that allowed her to gain a greater perspective on life.

“I have a hunger and I am very curious in getting to know people from different places, and why they function the way they do, think the way they do, and I think that has helped me along my journey,” she said.

“I understand that people are different, that you can’t put anybody in a box, and I think me being from just another country has helped me not look at people and try to put them in a box,” McPhee McCuin said. “Understand that if you’re from Mississippi, it’s different than being from New York, and I can relate to that because I was born and raised in another country and having an appreciation for different backgrounds and upbringings.”

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She carries this appreciation for differences to her coaching career. McPhee McCuin’s mantra for her and her team is “#NoCeilings”.

“You can’t have a limit on what you want to do,” McPhee McCuin said

McPhee McCuin emphasized at one particular practice what she believes to be the key to being successful in all things you do.

“I think that we try to complicate success and what that looks like, but when you talk to successful people, and you study them, the recipe is pretty simple,” she said. “They’re just coachable and disciplined. I think although that seems small, it’s a big factor. Successful people are people who have great mentors and their mentors give them advice, and they follow it.”

McPhee practices what she preaches. When she is not juggling responsibilities of a head coach and mentor to collegiate athletes, a wife, and mother of two young daughters, she also runs her own foundation in the Bahamas called “Back2Basics” that helps young children develop through education and sports. She is also a member of the Bahamian Athletic Hall of Fame Class of 2016 and the New England Basketball Hall of Fame Class of 2013. The sport that she began at age five has now led McPhee McCuin to the career of her dreams.

“Just the fact that I have the opportunity to impact young people on a daily basis, and not only young women but, people that I come into contact with. It’s really my mission to teach, develop, and inspire. Glad and blessed to be able to do that every single day,” she said.





Robyn Tannehill, a loving wife and mother of three, is currently serving her third year as current Mayor of Oxford. A graduate from the University of Mississippi in 1992, Tannehill earned her degree in Art and Graphic Design. Prior to being elected as Oxford’s Mayor she has served in a variety of roles within the city with some of those including an Oxford Board of Alderman, Assistant Director of the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Foundation, and Director of Tourism for the city. She came to Oxford for college where she met her college sweetheart and the two never left! They don’t call it the Velvet Ditch for no reason! A fun fact about Tannehill is that she was an integral piece in founding the Double Decker Arts Festival in 1995, which will celebrate its 25th Anniversary this year!

Link to Tannehill’s Page for Video Elements:
http://mstrailblazers.com/?page_id=672

Mom, Mayor, Mentor, [Change] Maker

Art major turned politician, Oxford's Major Robyn Tannehill is nothing short of someone who is committed to her community, family, and the growth of the city she has called home for nearly 30 years.

"I am a very unlikely politician," Tannehill said. "I mean what I say, say what I mean. I don't have a very good filter."

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I am a very unlikely politician.
I mean what I say, say what I mean.
I don't have a very good filter.

Born and raised in Florence, Alabama, Tannehill first came to Oxford in 1988 when she attended the University of Mississippi as a freshman.

Her path to becoming the mayor of Oxford was unconventional, and she never imagined herself involved in local government.

"Somebody said to me one day, 'We really think you should run for alderman,'" Tannehill said. "I was like, 'What? Me?'"

Tannehill first began working in Public Relations for the University of Mississippi in the early 90's while she was still a student. After graduation she became the Assistant Director of the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Foundation, and later the Director of Tourism for the City of Oxford, where she helped start the annual Double Decker festival.

She eventually started her own advertising agency while fulfilling many roles including President of the Chamber of Commerce, PTA President for several schools, and President of the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council.

"I decided I could make a lot more money doing my own graphic design and advertising as I was an art major, so I started an ad agency and did that for about 10 years," Tannehill said.

In 2011, Tannehill chaired the 30-million-dollar bond referendum to build the new high school in Oxford. Here she noticed that Oxford was growing, but nobody had a strategic plan to ensure the city was investing into water and sewage maintenance, road infrastructure, and design standards.

"I don't think we should tell you what color you have to paint [your building], but there's a level of quality that we should be demanding or we're going to grow into a town that we don't recognize," Tannehill said.

Others in the community began to see the active push Tannehill was making for change and encouraged her to run for Alderman herself. Tannehill did decide to run and won after a tireless and dedicated campaign, but her ambition did not stop there.

“I realized after the course of the first few years that to make a lot of the changes that I wanted to make, I needed to be in [the mayor’s] seat to do it,” Tannehill said.

Tannehill’s husband, Roy, was very supportive of Robyn and believed she could do it. “He encouraged me the whole way saying, ‘look, you’re a changemaker, go do it. Go follow what your heart is telling you to do,’” Tannehill said. “I’m one of those that thinks you’ve gotta put your money where your mouth is, and I was recognizing and pointing out a lot of things that I wanted to happen in Oxford, and a lot of things I thought were important for us to do, to save the parts of Oxford that we love as we’re growing so fast.” Despite his encouragement, they knew this decision would not necessarily be easy.

“We both knew it would be hard,” Tannehill said. “He’s in the National Guard, he is a criminal defense and personal injury attorney in town, he is the City Judge in Sardis, and so we’ve got a lot of balls in the air. He is so busy with his career as well.” Tannehill decided to give it a shot, and she soon discovered that no one else qualified to run.

“Oh wow, what a blessing, this is clearly what I am supposed to be doing, I am unopposed,” Tannehill said. “Then I realized, oh my gosh, I am the only fool that will do this job. That can’t be good. This is a terrible sign.”

Now, Tannehill is three years into her new role serving as only the second female mayor in Oxford. She wears many different hats and no day matches the previous. From looking at plans and meeting with building officials, to personnel issues, to coming up with action and safety plans for city events like Double Decker, her job varies widely.

“That’s one thing I enjoy the most about my job is there’s just not really a typical day,” Tannehill said. “They’re all different, it just kind’ve depends on the season and if anyone acts crazy that day.”

Tannehill credits her passion to allowing her to have so much success.

“My husband will say, ‘Baby, what makes you so good at your job is what makes it so hard for you, you just care so much,’” Tannehill said. “We both are passionate about leaving [Oxford] better than we found it. Life’s short, let’s go change this world, and we’re just changing our small little corner, but it’s important to the both of us.”



Life's short, let's go change this world,
and we're just changing
our small little corner, but it's
important to the both of us.

When Tannehill isn’t busy with her three children and city politics, she loves leading her young girls’ leadership classes weekly.

Over 50 girls apply, and 16 girls are chosen to participate.

“One of the things I am most passionate about is finding ways to encourage and mentor young girls, so they know at a very young age the sky is the limit,” Tannehill said. “Probably my favorite thing that I get to do is a 5th grade girls leadership class, Girl EmPOWERment. If I could lead a girls’ leadership program that was bigger than just our one school. I wish there were more hours in the day so I could now. But I think that is where my passion is and if I could do anything when I grow up, it would be to host girl leadership programs.”



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*All graphics were created originally by Karsyn King.