

Podcast | Legacy of Auspicious CEO Part 1

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LISA GIBERT: I think I knew more about where I didn't want to go than where I wanted to go.

RHONDA MORIN: Lisa Gibert has been the CEO of Clark College Foundation for 16 years, and in other financial roles before that. She's stepping aside in June. We sat down to talk with her about how she came to run the nonprofit and build it into one of the most successful and respected community college foundations in the nation.

In the first of this three-part series, we'll get to know Lisa and the building blocks of her character. Yeah, we'll learn how the aspiring businesswoman railed against following her family's path of becoming an accountant. But we'll also explore how she literally dived deeply into her passions.

She's a world champion many times over in a sport where getting a break was sometimes life threatening to her. But that's simply Lisa's character. When she finds something that moves her, she's all in, 150%.

SPEAKER: Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Horenstein Law Group, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Arnerich Massena, Quail Homes, and US Bank. Our platinum and gold donors are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

RHONDA MORIN: Welcome to Penguin Chats, a Clark College Foundation production. I'm Rhonda Morin.

LISA GIBERT: I grew up in a family where my dad and my uncle were twins, and they had an accounting firm. And the accounting firm was a well-established firm in Hillsboro, Oregon. Everybody within the family that had a background in accounting ended up going to work for the accounting firm. And that was the one thing that I knew I didn't want to do.

I knew I was prone to be in business, but that was the last thing that I wanted to do, was end up an accountant like the rest of the family and just ending up joining the firm.

RHONDA MORIN: Though Lisa Gibert never felt pressured by her father to become an accountant, that line of work would always dog her. College, though, was never in doubt. Her father, Roy Fordham, was a big proponent of higher education.

LISA GIBERT: He had this very strong sense that I had to get an education. There was never any question. There was no ifs, ands, or buts. You have 16 years of education to go through.

RHONDA MORIN: Before going off to college, Lisa had lots of chances to try her hand in business thanks to her dad's work. Roy Fordham ended up leaving the family business to join a former client, someone well known in the Vancouver area at the time.

LISA GIBERT: He ended up going to work for Ed Pietz and Tod McClaskey, and worked with the two of them in establishing the Red Lyon Motor Inn chain. And little did I know that I would have somewhat that same transition later in my life.

RHONDA MORIN: That chain started with two hotels. When the founder sold it in 1984, there were 52.

LISA GIBERT: It provided us as family members an opportunity to have an inside glimpse and, of course, opportunities for summer work and other things to just kind of expand our horizons.

RHONDA MORIN: And did it ever. She got a taste of how business works from being on the front line of a very busy hospitality business. She tried her hand at being a hostess, phone operator, bellhop, and even at the front desk where she had a thrilling encounter one day.

LISA GIBERT: I remember probably my most exciting experience was to be at the front desk when Pat Benatar came in, and I got to check her into her room. And she was just the most delightful lady, and she was so tiny. And, of course, I just loved her music, so I was infatuated.

[LAUGHS]

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RHONDA MORIN: When Lisa was a child, one of her sisters convinced her parents to buy a horse. Lisa would tag along, soaking in all she could about the huge animal, and this was the beginning of a lifelong love of horses. This time also revealed a rare bone condition that would affect her health and her choices.

LISA GIBERT: My cousin and I were out riding the horse. She was in the saddle. I was on the back of the saddle. The saddle ends up becoming loose and it slides off the side, and down we both go. And my cousin ended up breaking her arm, and bad enough that she had to have a plate and surgery. And I had fallen and actually had broken my hip. But at the time, we didn't know it. In the coming days that I started to complain about the fact that my hip hurt, and lo and behold, I had broken my hip. And I ended up 13 days in traction and ended up with a half a body in a cast. And even more so, the diagnosis said I had osteopetrosis, which is a petrifying of the bone, which creates your bones to become very, very brittle.

RHONDA MORIN: Lisa was only 5 and 1/2. And this is no small bone break-- this is a hip. It left her parents with a big decision. Do they keep her from doing all those things that kids love to do, like riding horses and playing contact sports? Or do they just let her be herself, knowing she'll be in and out of the hospital?

LISA GIBERT: Of course, I would always push the envelope. And I played fast-pitch softball, and I did volleyball. And at one point, I jumped into a sandpit doing some sort of a long jump type of thing and ended up not being able to walk for several days. And then, of course, the horses. And so my folks were just supportive enough that they recognized that they wanted me to have these opportunities.

RHONDA MORIN: It was the horses that stuck with her. By 8 and 1/2, she was riding them all the time. Then she stepped it up a notch in high school by competing with show horses. As an adult, she took it even further when she found her dream horse. But more on that in a minute. First, let's go to college.

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LISA GIBERT: I decided I'd become a finance major because it was as close to accounting as I could get without actually becoming an accountant. So I ended up leaving University of Oregon with a finance degree and really wide open idea as to where I might go to start my career.

RHONDA MORIN: Building the foundation for a career takes schooling, connections, patience, and a strong stomach for rejection. Lisa had all those in a Big Apple sort of way.

LISA GIBERT: I remember one of my first things that I did after graduating was my cousin and I went to New York, and he set me up with five interviews in New York City. And, as you can imagine, somebody just graduating from University of Oregon interviewing in New York, they don't really expect a lot from you. And quite frankly, they were quite taken aback that I could even come in and speak with them because they don't normally interview people with less than an MBA and 10 years of experience.

So it was a rude awakening to the world of interviewing and business. It definitely prepared me to not be scared of interviews after that because I didn't think it could get any worse. [LAUGHS] And so I was able to come back and really think about what would be best because when you first enter in the workforce, it's about positioning yourself for opportunities and for growth and understanding what your schooling taught you. Not necessarily about just getting a job.

RHONDA MORIN: She did eventually land a job with First Interstate Bank of California, where she got exposed to all aspects of banking with a focus on one type.

LISA GIBERT: My specific training was to become a commercial lending officer. It was and still is probably one of the most profound things that I went through as I developed growth and understanding and skill set within this arena, because it provided me a base as to finance and how things would fit together in the work world that I even rely on today in the job that I do here at the foundation.

RHONDA MORIN: After about a year of training, Lisa found herself in the financial district of San Francisco working as a financial analyst.

LISA GIBERT: They put us in front of loan committees. They drilled us as to how these businesses could warrant getting those loans. We had to defend them. We had to design the loan package and work with a loan officer out in the field.

RHONDA MORIN: She got a lot of experience in a short period of time. About three years into the job, however, the California bank started to change its business model. It didn't really resonate with her. Lisa decided it was time to go back to college.

She landed at the University of California Irvine to study for an MBA. Skip ahead two years as she was finishing up in 1989, and guess what? The ghost of accounting resurfaces.

LISA GIBERT: I graduated at a time when the financial and the economic marketplace with horrendous. People were applying for jobs and literally decorating their walls with rejection notices. And so here I was. I was a finance undergrad. I had an MBA to go with it. And I started to reach out and seek jobs in the financial field.

And every job or prospective employer that I talked to, the first words they'd ask me is, how much accounting have you had, and do you plan on sitting for the accounting exam? And I thought, you've got to be kidding me. After all these years of fighting it, what do I do now? Because here I had all this education, and it still wasn't good enough.

RHONDA MORIN: What happened next took Lisa completely off guard, but ultimately it put her on a path that took her full circle in her career. It has to do with that very thing she never wanted to do. First, though, as her career was forming, on a personal level, she was going deeper than she ever had before.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

LISA GIBERT: I've always loved swimming. I love the water. Snorkeling, of course, is fantastic. But I got under there, and as soon as I started to recognize, wow, I can breathe. And then it was like a little playground.

So I dropped his hand and off I went. And literally from that introduction, we came back and signed up for a class and got our open water certificate. Yeah, it was just an instant love for the sport.

RHONDA MORIN: The sport-- scuba diving. She's talking about the time she first tried to breathe underwater with a mouthpiece on during a lesson. Turns out it was something she could safely compete at.

LISA GIBERT: Because I have a very rare bone condition, I've always been one that has loved athletics and different competitive venues. Those venues weren't always the best for me because I break bones very easily.

The doctor looked at me and he goes, you know, of all the things you've ever wanted to do, this is probably the best because the only thing that I can think of risk here is that you'll hit your head with the tank, you know? So it was like a match that just worked.

RHONDA MORIN: There was another match at work too. While she was taking an underwater photography course in Monterey Bay in California, she met someone.

LISA GIBERT: It just happened that Brett was not part of my class, but he was always looking for somebody to dive with. And so when I got to Monterey, he just happened to be assigned my dive buddy for the day.

RHONDA MORIN: Those two dive buddies went on to have many adventures, including a trip to the altar where she married Brett Gibert. Finding love and eventually having a family helped complete her life. Brett helped her grow into even more demanding roles in her career.

Have you ever noticed how things have a way of coming full circle? Well, Lisa sure did. That need for an accounting skill continued to surface as she explored more opportunities.

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LISA GIBERT: I ran into a gentleman by the name of Deet Danelle, who was the HR person for Deloitte Haskins and Sells in Orange County, California. I found his approach to hiring for the accounting firm was so different, and it didn't seem to bother him that I didn't have the background in accounting that I thought I should have if I was going to be in that type of a role. And his response to me was, accounting is a teachable skill. You could take a class, you can learn that. And he said, but so much of what we do is about relationship building.

RHONDA MORIN: Turns out what the recruiter valued most of all was finding candidates who had personalities that worked well with his clients. All that number crunching stuff could come later.

LISA GIBERT: He came back and provided me an offer. Which, of course, my dad was just absolutely beaming over here after all these years. I was going to become an accountant. And I was also with a Big Six accounting firm. And shortly thereafter, it became an even bigger firm as that summer they had merged with Touche Ross and became Deloitte & Touche.

RHONDA MORIN: To prepare for the job, Lisa hit the books to review topics like corporate taxation, auditing, advanced accounting. At the same time, she was studying for the Certified Public Accountant test. She jokes that it felt like all she did was eat, drink, and sleep accounting that summer.

LISA GIBERT: It was all worth it. And when all was said and done and I became part of the class for Deloitte & Touche, once again, to my surprise, provided me such unique opportunities to learn and grow in areas that I had absolutely no idea that they were even available to me. And I got exposed to Securities and Exchange Commission companies, to travel agencies, to nonprofits and water districts and governmental entities. And it just opened up opportunities for me to see all sorts of different ways, and different ways that are industries of business that one could become intrigued with.

RHONDA MORIN: And this was a watershed moment for Lisa. She was learning about the heart of business. The inner workings of finances, governmental entities, and the complexities of human resources. Her major client back then was Denny's Restaurant and the publicly traded company it was affiliated with. She worked on their financial statements and audited their books. Early on, she was faced with a challenge. Denny's headquarters was moving to North Carolina. That meant job cuts for its workforce. Turns out this was a harbinger for her.

LISA GIBERT: We got to work through all the issues of eliminating or consolidating out a company, and what that meant to employees, and how you work through those issues of letting people go, providing severance packages, and all sorts of things. It really is an amazing training ground.

RHONDA MORIN: Balancing work and your personal life is an ongoing pursuit. Lisa found that grounding in her family, but also in a horse. Remember the reference to a horse earlier in the story? Well, his name was Pete, and she had discovered him in a small town in Washington in 1993.

LISA GIBERT: I never actually had written him. I had only seen him in a stall. I didn't even see him outside the stall. I just knew he was the horse for me.

I ended up buying him. He was three years old at the time. And he passed away when he was 21. He was truly amazing. He was an absolute blessing to me in so many ways. And we did so well. And he was a multi-world champion.

RHONDA MORIN: Between herself, family members, and her trainers, Pete won multiple world championships in two different breeds. The horse was registered as a Pinto and a Paint given his color and breed. He was a striking animal.

LISA GIBERT: You have to imagine this horse. In horse terms, it was 16.2 hands tall. A hand is four inches, and so you can imagine how tall it is. And he was big bodied.

RHONDA MORIN: This is no small hobby. The time commitment for training and traveling is extensive, the cost in the tens of thousands of dollars. But the discipline it taught her, as well as the fulfillment, was worth every penny.

LISA GIBERT: At the time, I was working part time for Moss Adams, and then running the show ring and the circuit at the same time. There were a couple of those years that I was ranked in the top 20 amateurs in the country.

RHONDA MORIN: She was racking up wins, and her family was right there with her. Lisa, husband Brett, their son Nathan, and her parents were all part of the show. She affectionately calls this time a true family affair.

LISA GIBERT: At one point, when I went to the Paint world show, I was actually seven months pregnant with Megan. And I got my Reserve World Championship at that point in time. I was in a pleasure driving class, and we got the reserve championship there. And here I am, out there seven months pregnant, riding and driving this horse at a world class level.

RHONDA MORIN: Back to her working life, the Orange County financial services firm began to undergo a transformation when she was a junior member of the team. Each entity had about 400 employees. It was here where she was first exposed to the stress of being downsized.

LISA GIBERT: I was one of the auditors on Denny's. We had a team out there of at least seven people at all times. And we were instructed that we were to stay by our phones on a particular day.

And so you're wondering if you're going to get a phone call or not. And the phone call, if it came, was an invitation to come to HR. And, of course, you knew that you were being eliminated.

It was a particular day they told each one of us to be by our phones. And by the end of that day, I was the only one left that hadn't gotten the call. [LAUGHS] And truthfully, it's funny because even when I went to work in accounting and from the audit firm, I was of the mindset-- two years, I'm getting my CPA, and I'm out of here. And I just had that mindset.

And interestingly enough, two years turned to four. And then four years turned to six. I did relocate after five years at Deloitte & Touche and came up to the Pacific Northwest. I was coming home because I was starting my family. And frankly, I just wanted to be close to a set of grandparents.

It was a good time for me to say, you know what? I've been away from home for a long time. I've done that. I felt comfortable with that. It allowed me to grow up and do the things that I felt like I needed to do. But it gave me that permission to just come home. And so back we came to the Pacific Northwest.

RHONDA MORIN: The Penguin Nation has greatly benefited to the tune of tens of millions of from her relocation. You'll learn more about that in the next editions of this series. It's when we'll transition to her work as an auditor and a relationship builder where one of her clients was Clark College Foundation.

LISA GIBERT: And the way that I got that position was one of my dad's employees, Nanette Walker, as the old adage goes, six degrees of separation. You call somebody up and say, hey, I have a candidate for you, and would you talk to my daughter? And so, lo and behold, that's what I did.

Little did I know that in several years in the future that Nanette would come back into play in my life as I worked very closely with her dad, Chick Scarpelli of Scarpelli Hall at Clark College. And then, of course, now I work with Nanette as she serves on the board, just like her brother did for many years.

RHONDA MORIN: Tune in next time for the second episode in our three-part series on the legacy of an auspicious CEO. In the meantime, visit our website, ClarkCollegeFoundation.org for a variety of other podcasts about Clark friends and alumni. That does it for this edition of Penguin Chats. Thank you for listening. I'm Rhonda Morin.

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