

Legacy of an Auspicious CEO, Part 3 of 3

Penguin Chats Podcast | March 1, 2022

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RHONDA MORIN: What does it take to become a leader of an institutional foundation? How do you navigate tense periods between a college and a foundation? And when growth is explosive in a short period of time, how do you adjust systems to prepare for it?

We've been exploring these and other questions during our three-part series about Lisa Gibert, the CEO of Clark College Foundation for the past 16 years. She'll soon be stepping aside. In this last edition, she prepares for her first-ever fundraising campaign just as the Dow Jones plummeted before the start of the Great Recession.

Later, a second campaign ran head-on into a global pandemic. During all this, Lisa would struggle with a personal tragedy and health issues that required months to recover. Her resilience was nothing less than remarkable as she continued to guide the foundation toward phenomenal success during tough times.

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RHONDA MORIN: Welcome to Penguin Chats, a Clark College Foundation production. I'm Rhonda Morin. Let's go back in time to 2008. Stock markets around the world plunge amid growing fears of a US recession, fueled by a subprime mortgage crisis.

The Great Recession triggered high unemployment, steep declines in housing prices, and soaring household debt. Millions in the US lost their jobs and savings. Later that year, Barack Obama was elected president. He would eventually sign into law a large stimulus package.

This was also the time that Clark College Foundation was gearing up for its first ever comprehensive fundraising campaign. That's industry speak for raising money for programs, scholarships, and building projects. The foundation had just finished a feasibility study that took the region's temperature on how they'd react to being asked for donations.

Despite the recession, or perhaps because of it, residents living in Clark's Service District said they were committed to the college. Jan Oliva, a local philanthropist who was co-chair of the campaign at the time, said people overwhelmingly supported the college and the idea of a campaign.

JAN OLIVA: But we went out to the community there is a 95% favorable impression of the college. I mean that is amazing. For 90% of community wide for people to say, we love this college.

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We were very confident that we would have the support of people once we presented the needs that we were facing. But we had to show them what was needed, what we could do to bolster the economy and the lives of individuals here in the community. We knew they would be with us and they were.

RHONDA MORIN: By January 2009, the foundation had launched its first campaign calling it, Ensuring a Bright Future. It raised more than \$20 million for Clark College by the time it ended in 2014.

LISA GIBERT: It was very, very purposeful. It was about keeping students in school and making sure that we had the opportunities available for the depth and the breadth of the community as a whole, because everybody was searching for answers. Everybody was searching for help to get out of this mess. And we did.

RHONDA MORIN: The money went to remodeling the dental hygiene facility, STEM projects, and faculty training. But what rose to the top, was the part that affects students directly, according to Jan Oliva.

JAN OLIVA: You can see visually what we did, but again it's probably what doesn't always meet the eye that brought the most joy from the campaign. And that if you walk around campus and you look at all the students who are here, and if you have the time to stop and talk to them many of, them would say, yes I'm here thanks to the help of a scholarship.

RHONDA MORIN: Seeing the fruits of her labor in the faces of students is a delight for Lisa too. As a leader, she's always thinking about the future for those individuals. Toward the end of the Ensuring a Bright Future Campaign, the college pressed her to secure land for a future campus in the northern part of Clark County.

LISA GIBERT: I was able to develop a relationship and a mutually beneficial situation with them and the Boschma family to get what we were looking for in the way of a footprint in North County. But also to establish a legacy on behalf of the Boschma family and their presence in North County for so many years. They were immigrants that had come to this country and had run a dairy farm for years, so it's been a great story.

RHONDA MORIN: She's talking about land in Ridgefield, Washington that she pretty much single-handedly secured for the foundation in 2014. Part gift, part purchase, the land represents a long-term vision for the future of Clark, made possible by gifts from the Boschma family and Ridgefield East 1 Associates.

The gifts of land totaling nearly \$4 million did become part of the Ensuring Bright Future Campaign. The foundation ended up securing nearly 70 acres of land at more than \$11 million in

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value. Today, combined with \$59 million from the state of Washington to construct a building, the college will soon break ground on Clark College at Boschma Farms.

Gerry Boschma: Well, this is quite an honor for our family to be recognized tonight. Also, kind of full circle for us as they Lisa had mentioned my parents both did their citizenship class here at Clark College, my dad over 50 years ago. So that's pretty cool

Thanks again for just honoring our family and for including the name of Clark College, our name and therefore my dad's legacy because that's pretty special to us. So thank you.

[APPLAUSE].

RHONDA MORIN: That was Gerry Boschma in 2018, at an event known as Saving Excellence. The family received the prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Philanthropy from the foundation that year during the event.

[MUSIC PLAYING].

Whether it was the first campaign or the next one, none of the successes in fundraising would have been possible had it not been for Lisa's, and the board of directors', hard work in mending the relationships with the college.

LISA GIBERT: There needed to be a gathering of the mines to figure out how best that we could work together. Yes, we had a campaign, we had aspects of that campaign and an overarching goal, but for the foundation operationally, we needed more clarity and the college was a huge part of that.

We needed to understand what they needed us to do. And we needed them to understand what we do and how we do it. And so we launched which I continue to shake my head and look back on that time into strategic planning in 2012, while we were in the midst of this massive campaign effort that we had never tried before on such a large scale.

RHONDA MORIN: Out of that process of intensive meetings between the two entities, came a new beginning.

LISA GIBERT: We were able to get out some discomforts, some challenges that we'd had in the past that we had never really addressed before. And although those were difficult conversations, as I reflect back on my 23 years with the foundation, I don't think I've ever been more proud to say that this was an opportunity that the foundation of the college had that allowed us to come together.

And we created a mantra, called Team Clark. And I stand by that. I think by that-- I think about that all the time and I even include our little tagline in the reports that I provide to the college trustees, as well as the foundation board, because that tagline says, together we are stronger.

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RHONDA MORIN: Stronger in that as the leaders and boards of the two entities communicated more often, they quickly worked to sculpt a vision into a reality. Here's how Jan Oliva remembers it.

JAN OLIVA: When we were beginning the campaign it definitely was a time when the trustees and the foundation board came closer together I think, because we were striving for mutual goals. We knew we had to work together and it was for the well-being of the students and the entire campus.

LISA GIBERT: Once we had direction and vision from the institution, then we could come alongside that and take a deeper dive and say, OK, what are the initiatives and projects that we think that we can be most successful at from a fundraising perspective. And how do we align with the institution and make that possible.

RHONDA MORIN: As these conversations improved, the Ensuring Bright Future Campaign was still a few million away from its end. That effort would wrap up successfully yet, as often happens when campaigns get close to the end, the vice president for development left for another job. Lisa now had to start thinking about what was next.

LISA GIBERT: Once we surpassed it, it was just such a relief and such excitement that we had been so successful. So you take a huge sigh of relief, and you celebrate, and you start cleaning up and reflecting on what had been done and then you say, OK, brush off your sleeves and get ready because we got to look to the future and see what the next campaign will look like.

RHONDA MORIN: Some of those steps included another feasibility study to test the waters to see what types of needs were in the region now.

LISA GIBERT: We worked directly with the college. We identified probably \$100 million worth of projects. And we moved forward and based upon what we heard, we sharpened our pencil and we honed in on what we believed were the key areas of the campaign that we wanted to focus on. And of course, in the back of my mind is that terror of, Oh boy were we a one hit wonder, to go back to the days of music, and you just think, can I do it again? And can we build a team to make this happen?

RHONDA MORIN: The foundation would do another one of course, it was just that Lisa was faced with rebuilding her team and getting all the pieces in place. It's a lot of work. The next campaign would take a different tact, it wouldn't solely focus on dollars. Her board chair at the time, Greg Wallace, just about knocked her socks off when he shared his vision. He wanted to increase the donor base by 5 times.

LISA GIBERT: We needed to think deeper. We needed to not just go after initiatives, but we needed to build our base. We needed to engage a deeper and broader breadth of our community.

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We needed to dive deeper with our employers. And identify people that had moved to this area that nobody knew.

RHONDA MORIN: While these new seeds were being planted, tragedy struck. In 2014, Lisa's husband, Brett, died suddenly from complications following a routine surgery. He was 53.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

The profound grief she felt losing her soul mate unmoored her for a time. Over time though, with support from her family, friends, and the foundation team, she returned to work. Once back, she and Greg Wallace, the board chair, started to talk more about that vision.

LISA GIBERT: Let's try to create a donor base that's five times our existing donor base. And I'm thinking, yeah that is a big hairy audacious goal. But in the end, it wasn't about how big that was, it was a recognition that if you put something out there that is inspiring and insightful and you know it's going to be a challenge, then even if you don't make the mark, you're going to be significantly further along than you were before.

RHONDA MORIN: Over time, the once scary goal, evolved into new ways the foundation engaged people. Lisa had hired Joel B. Munson as the Chief Advancement Officer for the new effort. He explains.

JOEL B. MUNSON: In many ways it was really about going back to the basics and building this pyramid of support, where we wanted to get the word out about all the great things that was going on at the college in particular around the foundation, and we've been able to do that through all of our really great marketing efforts.

We started our podcast series, we enhanced our magazine, changed the focus of that. We started to do more work with our social media. So there was just this flurry of renewed activity with communications and marketing which I think has made a huge difference.

RHONDA MORIN: Another addition was redoubling the efforts of the foundation's major gift officers to nurture their relationships with the community.

JOEL B. MUNSON: We helped them learn more about what was going on. We helped connect them to the things that the college that were of interest to them.

RHONDA MORIN: And those efforts have really paid off.

JOEL B. MUNSON: We devised a campaign to help us expand the donor base that we had. And certainly we haven't expanded it 5 times and that was never the goal. But we have probably doubled it, maybe even more than doubled it and that's huge.

And what's really great is we've had more than 5,100 unique donors to this campaign that have given well over 22,000 gifts over the course of the campaign. And the vast majority of those probably between 60% and 64% are either brand new donors, or their donors who were just

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giving very small amounts in previous fundraising efforts, and had significantly in this campaign increased their giving.

LISA GIBERT: Ultimately those 5,000 voices are our community. And we're a community college. So we need to listen to them and have them get engaged, and recognize that the community college is an asset that can benefit them in so many different ways from lifelong learning, to continued education, to activities and events that happen. And so it really is a vibrant environment.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

RHONDA MORIN: Lisa's personal challenges continued while she was putting the building blocks in place for the next campaign, including new staff. Remember that rare bone condition she has from Part 1 of the series? It makes her bones extra brittle so that they break easily. Turns out, a rod that braced her femur from a prior injury had moved and it required surgery. Lisa was still raw from losing her husband following a surgery. You can imagine her trepidation. She eventually had two operations in 2017, and again the next year for something else in her back. They all went OK, but she had to take time off and let her team do the heavy lifting.

JOEL B. MUNSON: When she really came to know how serious the situation was, we all knew that we probably had to look at things a little bit differently. And then certainly to make matters worse, on a bright sunny mid day I think it was in Portland I tripped on an outcropping of a sidewalk and fell and broke both of my arms. And so Lisa and I used to laugh that between the two of us we made up one person.

We knew he had a good team. We have all the makings of being successful. Lisa had really paved the way for us in terms of helping us get the resources we need from the board to help us be successful.

We had great buy-in from the board. We had great support from our team. And we knew we had the capacity out in the community to do this. So for all of those reasons we said, no, we shouldn't hesitate. Now is the time.

RHONDA MORIN: Fast forward to 2019, when a new virus began rapidly infecting, and killing, people across the globe and sending them inside. 2020 culminated in the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, sparking civil unrest not seen in decades.

Meanwhile, as Clark dealt with these life-altering events, its 13-year president left, and an interim took the reins. The interim president led the college during a heated faculty strike and a budget deficit, while the college search for a permanent replacement.

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The pandemic has been a particularly challenging time for Lisa as a leader. Because the whole world had changed and what felt like an instant, fundraising had to pivot too.

LISA GIBERT: You really are, as a leader, carrying that burden deeply reflecting on what you are feeling as a person versus what you feel like you need to do on behalf of the organization, on behalf of the board, and of course the employees. And I found that to be very challenging. It takes or puts a great weight on you as a person to reach out and to make sure that people are OK. When two weeks came and went, and then a month, and then two months and then it was all of a sudden no, this is a change of life. This is about how are we going to reposition ourselves so that we can still do our work, we can support our employees many of them in extremely different positions in their lives. Some with little kids, some with aging parents, and some unfortunately having both to where they're managing a personal demand that we've never seen before.

RHONDA MORIN: Lisa's talking about the shift she made during the pandemic to support the foundation's employees, while keeping them motivated to work with donors to help students stay in school when there were so many unknowns.

LISA GIBERT: For us at the foundation, it was about making sure that we could bring in emergency funds when we needed to. And that paired up with CARES money through the federal stimulus really supported our students and kept far more in school than if it hadn't been there.

I don't think it's a surprise that obviously emergency financial assistance was absolutely the biggest need at Clark, and that assistance actually could take place in a number of ways. We had a huge outpouring of support particularly in the area of our food pantry, because people were going out or without a regular access to staples within their pantries.

RHONDA MORIN: Early in the pandemic, some donors who were considering giving large donations, decided to hold back because of the political unrest gripping the country and the uncertainty surrounding the virus. Joel Munson explains.

JOEL B. MUNSON: They really said to us, we need some time to see what's going to happen and we've got to reprioritize some of the things that we're supporting in light of COVID. The economy at that point had tanked so nobody really knew what the future held.

We decided again, that because we were well more than halfway in the campaign that we wanted to continue and that we were just going to have to do the best we could, we thought, the best that we could do would be to really help to try to focus on the issues related to COVID that had an impact on our college and our students.

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And what we found was that many, many of our students were in need of emergency funding to help them get through, because so many of them had lost their jobs. And so we shifted and we asked people to support us with these COVID emergency funds and we were very successful.

LISA GIBERT: We've had a huge number of our corporate partners that have provide resources to allow us to purchase a freezer and a commercial refrigerator so that we can make sure that some of those other critical nutrients that should be part of everyone's diet were accessible.

RHONDA MORIN: In all, the community rallied and helped the foundation raise and distribute to Clark more than \$800,000 during the pandemic.

[JAZZ MUSIC].

Another highlight during an otherwise trying time was scholarships.

LISA GIBERT: There is no gift that you can give that's better than a gift of education. Because nobody, literally nobody, whether it's one class or 45 credit hours, which is equivalent to a year's worth of studies nobody can take that away from you.

I think there's a key reality check here, that education is lifetime. We need to make sure that anybody who wants to get an education and wants to improve their life and improve their livelihood for their family shouldn't be denied because they don't have the money to attend. That's a problem that we can fix. And I'm absolutely convinced that we can fix that.

JOEL B. MUNSON: It's such an applied and tangible way to make a difference. It's an easy transaction and it's relatively easy to see what the outcome of something like that is going to be. With scholarships, you can make the scholarship it goes to a student, that student completes his or her studies hopefully and goes on to get where there's the satisfaction, there's the reward, there's the climax that I think a lot of people really find very fulfilling.

[JAZZ MUSIC].

RHONDA MORIN: The foundation's donors and partners agree and they voted with their wallets. By early 2022, more than \$16 million had been donated to scholarships more than doubling the original goal. [JAZZ MUSIC].

There are many ebbs and flows in a career. It can be tough to pick one or two highlights that reflect your entire body of work. Lisa though, is quick to mention one thing that she was determined to do.

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LISA GIBERT: There was no part of me that was ever going to allow the foundation of the college not to come back together. That no matter how difficult the conversation has been or even in the future could be, we just need each other.

And even though we go about our work in different ways, we are just critically important in our mere existence that we need to support each other. We need to move forward and build this college to be and continue to be the successful institution that it is. We just have to. Our community needs it or our economy needs it. Our employers need it.

JAN OLIVA: I so admire Lisa's tenacity. When she has a goal whether personally or with the foundation, she will do everything in her power to reach that goal and to nurture people and bring them along so that they truly feel part of that mission that she is trying to accomplish. And in the end, you have a strong community of people who are willing to walk on water for her. [LAUGHTER].

JOEL B. MUNSON: You've got a fundraising team that believes in what they're doing. That is 100% supportive of the college that loves the work that they do, and chooses to be here and do this work despite all the other opportunities that are out there for development professionals and believe me there are many.

I just want to make sure that we give proper shout outs to those people on our staff who have worked so well and so strategically and so creatively, they deserve a great deal of praise and acknowledgment. [MUSIC PLAYING].

RHONDA MORIN: For someone who railed against becoming an accountant to questioning whether she could lead a fundraising shop, there are many examples of how her staff, board, the college, and the community admire her commitment to the job. Yet, after all this time, do you think she considers herself a fundraiser?

LISA GIBERT: I don't. [LAUGHTER].

RHONDA MORIN: How much does it take, how many years?

LISA GIBERT: You know it's funny because I've had people say, well you're a fundraiser, I'm like no I'm not. Do I do fundraising? Yes, but more so I don't really look at it as fundraising. I look at it as building relationships within our community, understanding our stakeholders, and understanding our college, and trying to determine what their objectives are and how best those objectives come together to meet a common goal. I don't consider myself a fundraiser. I consider myself a matchmaker.

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RHONDA MORIN: That matchmaking has raised \$50 million in the span of two decades. It's also landed the foundation a couple dozen national and regional awards including recognizing Lisa as one of the top fundraisers in the country. Now wouldn't you agree she's exactly those things and so much more?

LISA GIBERT: I'm deeply humbled by the experience because I can tell you the rewards that I have gotten as a person and by seeing our success far outweigh whatever I could have done to put it back in. It's been a career that I fell into. I didn't know it was coming but I'll tell you it's been a career that has just left me with a very full heart.

[MUSIC PLAYING].

RHONDA MORIN: Be sure to subscribe to Penguin Chats wherever you get your podcasts. Visit our website ClarkCollegeFoundation.org to listen to the other podcasts about Lisa Gibert, as well as fascinating stories about Clark alumni. Well, that does it for this edition of Penguin Chats. Thanks for listening. I'm Rhonda Morin.

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