



Veronica Biggins
Senior Partner, Heidrick & Struggles

A SHERo's SHERo

Distinguished, classy and oh so inspirational – just three of the many descriptors befitting this extraordinary leader. Some might call her a SHERo's shero – a female role model for other female role models.

While that's certainly true, in actuality, Veronica Biggins is an inspiration and a role model for all leaders - no matter the gender, no matter the race.

A girl of the south

"I'm a child of the 60's," she proudly confesses, "and definitely a girl of the south." Veronica grew up in Greensboro, NC, one of three children of Jacqueline and Andrew Williams. That she and her brothers would be academically oriented wasn't really a choice. Their father was Dean of Academic Affairs at the School of Mechanical Engineering at North Carolina A&T University. Their mother was a teacher.

Life in Greensboro was good for Veronica and her family, but it was also representative of the civil rights' struggle that was taking place across the country. The first "sit-down" took place at the local Woolworth's counter, and the impact of that event helped change the future for young Veronica and her siblings.

Like a good Catholic girl, Veronica attended parochial schools until the 11th grade. She "fondly" remembers the oxfords and the uniforms. But later, having the opportunity to attend public school, she credits this early experience with teaching her an important lesson: (laughingly)... "I found out sin's not all bad!"

When the time came for Veronica to choose a college, she could have chosen her hometown school, Bennett College, where today, another SHERo – Johnnetta Cole – is president. But that was not to be. Perhaps it was providence that brought Veronica to the capital of the south, Atlanta, in 1964, to continue her educational and life journey at Spelman College. It was unlikely, however, that she had any idea of the life-altering experiences that awaited her.

Pursuing her liberal arts education at Spelman, majoring in psychology and sociology – interacting with other intelligent and motivated young black women - was certainly a

valuable experience for this young girl of the south. But this was also an historic period in U.S. history.

“One week I was listening to Robert Kennedy speak on campus,” Veronica vividly recalls, “and the next week, he was killed.”

“I also have vivid memories of sitting in Sisters’ Chapel on the Spelman campus where Martin Luther King’s body was lying in state. Living through these times expanded my education well beyond my liberal arts degree. It gave me much more of a world perspective.”

The bigger world

The next stop on Veronica’s life journey was Georgia State University. Here she would increase her base of knowledge and prepare her for the future in the professional world. Along the way, her life changed in an even more fundamental way. She met Franklin Biggins and knew he was “the one.” They were married, he became her life-partner, and the father of their two daughters.

Together, Franklin and Veronica began a new journey that would take them to Washington, DC where he attended law school. Also together they entered the world of “parenthood” and welcomed their first daughter - Dawn. Later their second daughter, Kenzie, was born and brought even more joy to the Biggins’ household.

In addition to her family responsibilities, Veronica added career responsibilities to her calendar. “The first job I applied for was with C&S Bank and I was hired in their management training program, a great beginning point, I think. Many executives have had a similar experience. It certainly taught me two key lessons: how to deal with people and the importance of good customer service.”

Banking and beyond - important lessons

“I learned the old fashioned way – by doing the ‘grunt stuff’ – walking around looking for trash, for example. That taught me an invaluable lesson, i.e., *everything matters.*”

“I also learned that nobody’s too big or too important to answer their own phone and one day, I answered it to find out that I was about to handle my first *balloon note*. I had no idea what a balloon note was, but two hours later, I certainly knew. That experience taught me another important lesson: it’s not about what *I* know, but about engaging the right resources to get the answers. I believe this is a critical lesson that leaders have to learn early on.”

“During my career in banking, I had many other learning opportunities. Sometimes it came as a result of my being the first black woman anyone had seen in my position. One case in point, when I arrived as the new branch manager in Marietta, GA, people literally *lined up* to look at me. There was a spectacle...and I was it!”

“I was also the first bank officer to get pregnant and take maternity leave. And when my daughters got older, I sometimes took them to work with me and they would play under my desk while I worked. This was a different experience from the guys I worked with.”

“Looking back I know that helping people get mortgages and buy their homes was a very rewarding experience and I learned a lot in my 20+years in the banking industry. Overall things went pretty well. Along the way, I also led the Human Resources organization and ultimately, the philanthropic foundation as well,” added Veronica.

Serving her country – at the White House

One professional experience Veronica had not expected came in a most unusual manner: a “spend the night” invitation to one of her daughters. It all started when Veronica and her husband were attending the annual Renaissance Week-end over the New Year’s holiday at Hilton Head Island, SC. They had attended for many years and, in fact, continue the tradition today. This particular year, young *Chelsea Clinton* was attending with her parents, then “Mr. and Mrs.” Bill Clinton (before he became Governor of Arkansas). Chelsea invited her friend, Kenzie Biggins to spend the night, however Veronica said, “No...I don’t know her parents so you’re not going.”

Well, suffice it to say, over time, the Biggins and the Clintons got better acquainted. Years later, there would be another invitation: this time it was an invitation to attend a White House Christmas party. By this time, of course, Bill Clinton was President of the United States.

“While it was a little like ‘country come to town,’” Veronica said, “this was one invitation I quickly accepted. I told my husband...we’re going!” And they did.

Fast forward to a phone call Veronica received back in Atlanta. It was POTUS calling (the acronym for the President of the United States!) He wanted her for a White House post!

“You have to understand. I was extremely flattered but not particularly interested in going to Washington. Washington’s very complicated and the sport there is taking people out. Many careers are made and lost in D.C.”

“This was also a very difficult decision from a family standpoint...while one daughter was in college, the other was still in elementary school. Fortunately, however, I have a great husband who’s done his share of carpooling. He encouraged me to take the job and gave me the confidence that together we could make it work.”

The way it worked was that Veronica stayed in Washington Monday through Friday, and came home to her family every week-end. She also made it clear that she would not be making this a permanent assignment.

“It was my job to fill some 4000 positions – all of which had very stringent regulations and specifications associated with them. What I had to learn was *the process* – that’s the

way things work in the White House. I also learned that there's no such thing as confidentiality. *If you even think something, it's in the media!*"

Fortunately, Veronica managed to keep her thoughts off the front page and complete her mission in just a year and a half. All the politically appointed positions were filled. True to her word and her family priorities, she left the White House, without regret, and returned to her own house in Atlanta.

But as one door closes, another opens...and the next one would lead to the United Nations. Veronica was appointed as Vice Chair of the United States Delegation to the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995.

Preparing for this role, Veronica did some real soul-searching. She became much more aware of the positions the US had or had not taken on human rights and women's rights. For example, she came to realize that the US had never officially spoken against apartheid. But, she also gained an increased appreciation for the complexities of all of these issues.

When the time came to go to Beijing with Co-Chairs Hillary Clinton and Madeline Albright, Veronica was both excited and uncertain about what to expect. For the next three weeks, an amazing mass of women gathered together in China from all around the globe. Against all odds, including some of the most challenging physical conditions imaginable, they came, they communicated, and they committed to continue the struggle to free women and children around the world from the oppression of poverty, disease, and indignity.

What a scene this was: a tapestry of brightly colored clothing – except for the Americans who all wore their black suits – amidst a sea of different skin tones! What a testimony to their purpose that their passion and emotion spoke even louder than words – so much so that in many cases, no translation was needed – only the ability to read each others' faces. Clearly, this is an experience Veronica Biggins will never forget.

Another transition

The next big stop on Veronica's professional journey was – and is – Heidrick & Struggles, one of the country's most reputable executive and board search firms. Drawing on her background as a banking executive and an expert in the identification of talent, she was a natural for the role. But not just any role: she is senior partner and leader of the firm's Diversity Services Practice.

Ask her what she does as an executive search firm partner and this is how she responds, "I talk to people about their dreams."

"I also look for the qualities that companies need most – like integrity, respect for others, the ability to learn from mistakes, and the ability to cope with difficult situations."

An interesting thing happened to Veronica when she herself was being interviewed on behalf of Heidrick & Struggles in a competitive search situation. The interviewer asked a question about a search that went wrong. “So, I told him about one I had encountered,” she said, “and apparently, I was the *only one* he interviewed who answered the question. As a result, our firm got the search!

Currently, in addition to her work with Heidrick & Struggles, Veronica serves on two corporate boards, AirTran Airways and Avnet, as well as the board of trustees for the Woodruff Arts Center, and the International Aids Fund. Still serving her country, she remains the Chairman of the Slovak American Enterprise Fund.

Legacy of leadership

Because of her integrity and exemplary leadership, Veronica’s career in executive search continues to thrive. At the same time, her legacy of giving back and supporting other people’s success has become even more important. “People need coaching and encouragement,” she explains, “and it’s up to each of us as leaders and managers to provide that to our people. It’s also important that we learn to be better listeners.”

“I also highly recommend hiring people smarter than you are. That’s the way to build the strongest team and to beat the competition.”

With valuable advice like this shared continuously, is there any wonder why so many consider her a role model and a SHERo? Certainly not. She is indeed a leadership role model for all generations and across all borders. Would that we had more like her.

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