



*Lara O'Connor Hodgson –
Chief Operating Officer
Dewberry Capital Corporation*

A Woman Who Would Be President

Could a female aerospace engineering major with a Harvard MBA become president? Well, before you answer that question, you need to know Lara O'Connor Hodgson.

Lara is a vibrant, extremely intelligent young businesswoman who thrives on ambiguity, teaches creativity, and is passionate about connecting diverse people and ideas. She was once described as having “an engineering mind with a liberal arts personality.” An apt description, but still, only the tip of the iceberg.

Born and raised in Atlanta, Lara grew up in a “Beaver Cleaver” type family – the older of two girls. Home and family were a protective environment with solid values and a conservative bent. Lara attended Catholic school where she was a stand-out in every way - academically, athletically, and socially. One of her strengths was running track. Like most things Lara does, she was very good at it. So good, in fact, that she earned a scholarship to Georgia Tech and a spot on the varsity track team.

From valedictorian to aerospace engineer

As the top honors' student and valedictorian of her graduating class at St. Pius X High School, Lara had many options including MIT. “Actually my senior year was tough because of all the pressure to make the right decision about college. Looking back, I see it as a defining time for me, when I began to set my own goals rather than have someone else do it for me. Everyone around me had a strong opinion of where I should go and I struggled to

balance my need for top academics as well as athletic and social / leadership opportunities.”

Later, she made it a point to go back to her high school counselors and encourage them not to pressure other students to select a school just because it was the most “impressive” but to ensure it was the right match.

Having chosen Georgia Tech for her undergraduate experience, Lara said, “It was exactly the right place for me.” While there were approximately five women in her aerospace engineering classes, that didn’t deter Lara at all. Before her junior year, one of her advisors told her about a highly competitive Defense Department program in Japan in which forty students from the top US engineering schools would be selected. Lara applied and was selected.

In 1992 Lara spent an intense three-month internship in Koriyama, Japan, immersed in the culture and living with a Japanese family. “One of the things that stood out most about that experience, “ Lara said, “was that we spent a lot of time talking about global challenges and it made me think about solving impossible problems. Clearly, this requires thinking outside the box.”

When Lara returned to the US, she continued her studies at Georgia Tech, graduating with a BS in Aerospace Engineering with highest honors. She was featured in *USA Today* as one of the top 20 students in the country and in 1993, was named “National Leader of the Year” by Omicron Delta Kappa (ODK), the national leadership honor society.

Lara was sought after and interviewed by several consulting companies. Interestingly, she earned a reputation among her peers for not always answering questions asked by the recruiters and instead, often turned the question around. When one recruiter

asked her how many quarters are collected in a day at Lenox Square Mall, Lara responded, “Is that what your consulting firm does?”

Despite some quirky questions from recruiters, one of the consulting firms captured Lara’s attention. She went to work for Andersen Consulting’s new Strategic Services Division as their first business analyst.

“I’ve never had a job that existed before I got there,” Lara said. Working for Andersen was a good experience. I had a good mentor, George Williams, who encouraged me to try new things and stretch beyond my skill set “just as long as I didn’t embarrass him.”

An Olympics ambassador turns Harvard MBA

While consulting, Lara decided to apply to Harvard’s MBA program. She was accepted, but even that would change. The 1996 Olympic Games were coming to Atlanta and Lara was asked to play an important role, i.e., to serve as an “ambassador” to Lebanon and to help with politically sensitive diplomacy among participant countries’ training staff, dignitaries, the Olympic Committee and local officials.

Trained in conflict resolution and negotiations skills, Lara was ideally suited for her Olympic assignment. But what about Harvard? “Defer it,” Lara said. Harvard argued, but agreed to a process that worked for her to enter the next year.

When the Olympics were over, Lara was married to Casey Hodgson, her college sweetheart (and fellow Olympic Ambassador (to Aruba) and they headed to Boston. She found the classes extremely stimulating and challenging. She remembers one course where they evaluated management assessment tools and found a bias against women leaders. In that same course, Lara wrote her

own case study in the third person. “It was pretty interesting and revealing, having your fellow students critique you,” she said.

Lara had another opportunity while at Harvard to do a field study with the Walt Disney Corporation. She wasn’t seeking employment but she got questioned anyway. “At a meeting, I ended up speaking with a man who mentioned a particular management vacancy. I told him I thought companies were missing an opportunity when they don’t ask people *what they want to do*, rather than just trying to fit a talented person to a specific job description”

“The next thing I knew, the man asked me to write-up my “dream job” and overnight it to him. I did, but it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.”

The result? Well, it was like Disney magic. Lara was offered a job to work for the man who was the second in line to the Disney chairman! After a similar conversation with Dr. Thomas Middelhoff at a cocktail party, Lara was offered a position to work for the Chairman of Bertelsmann.

Unbelievable! Well, not as unbelievable as her response. “I declined the offers, not in a cavalier manner, but because it wasn’t the right thing for me at that point in time. Casey was working for Coca-Cola Enterprises when we married and they went out of their way to move us to Boston and let Casey commute to continue in his career path. We needed to return to Atlanta for his career.” (Note: The couple continues to reside in Atlanta where they hope to raise their own family one day.)

After graduating from Harvard, Lara considered dozens of job offers. She accepted a position with iXL, a fast-growth, Atlanta-based company chaired by Bert Ellis. IXL (now Scient) is an internet strategy and consulting firm. Lara founded the Retail and

Consumer Products division and built it into one of the top performing groups in the company.

In January 2000, as iXL was at the top of its game, Lara was lured away by a client, Dunk.net, a Los Angeles-based footwear and apparel company, founded by Shaquille O'Neal. The company manufactured its products utilizing mass customization. Lara made a difficult decision: to leave the group that she had built and take on this new challenge in California.

“I was confident that the team I had built at iXL was solid and would continue to be successful even if I left.” This proved true. Over the next year, as iXL fell into financial difficulty, the Retail & Consumer Products Group was one of two groups that remained intact through the final stages in which the company was acquired.

At Dunk, Lara served as Executive Vice President, and oversaw the daily operations which included sales, marketing, IT, operations and administrative functions. Working with several of Nike's early employees, Dunk built a manufacturing process in Macao that enabled consumers to design custom shoes, the same way that Dell manufactures computers. The product was successfully executed but fell into difficult times as it tried to grow despite the economic crash in April of 2000.

In 2001, Dunk licensed its brand and facility and Lara returned to Atlanta. She decided to take some time off and focus on her community roles. As a member of the Board of SciTrek, she was asked to work alongside Lewis Massey in turning around Atlanta's struggling Science and Technology Learning Center. She also focused on her public speaking business and traveled around the country working with executives on techniques to think differently and innovatively.

In November 2001, she met John Dewberry, founder of Dewberry Capital Corporation, a commercial real estate development company. John asked her to join the company. She initially resisted but was intrigued with John's vision for transforming Atlanta into a truly livable and vibrant city. She was also impressed with the fact that this entrepreneur could see that while he had a vision, he needed to build a team to make it happen. Even though she didn't have any real estate development experience, she was confident that her strengths in general management, corporate strategy and operations would benefit the organization. John agreed.

A year later, it's clear that Lara is thriving both professionally and personally. She was recently nominated for Woman of the Year in Technology, serves on the SciTrek Board, is a member of the Board of Trustees of Georgia Tech's Alexander Tharpe Fund, and is chairman of the PATH Association's Peachtree Battle Path project. Lara is a featured presenter on industry trends and innovations for organizations such as the American Marketing Association, ICSC, SHRM, Harvard Business School, Georgia Tech and the Technology Alliance of Georgia (TAG).

Long term, is it really within the realm of possibility that Lara could set her sites on political office, including the highest one in the land? Well, in an age of rapid change, where creative thinking and diplomatic solutions are essential for global peace, a woman with Lara's intellect, confidence, and personality could be just the right ticket. Maybe we should just ask her, "What do you want to do?"

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By Susan B. Hitchcock (Creator of the Age of SHEroes)