



## Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014

**Topic: "Leadership with a Purpose: Making a Difference in our City and our Region"**  
featuring Renay Blumenthal, President of the Grady Health Foundation.

**Renay Blumenthal** joined the Women in Leadership series with an insightful, transparent discussion on her career path along with the successes and challenges she faced along the way. The way she honestly opened up to the audience was remarkable and truly sets her apart as a leader.

Renay is a rare Atlanta native, and she has been lucky enough to serve her hometown throughout her different career experiences. Her path before becoming involved with the Grady Health Foundation is very fascinating. She has worked for both former governors Roy Barnes and Zell Miller, as well as former mayor of Atlanta, Shirley Franklin. She also worked for the Metro Atlanta Chamber. The only time Renay worked outside of Atlanta was when she lived in Savannah for five years right out of college. Living in Savannah, Renay commented on the noticeable differences of Atlanta's warm, welcoming feel in comparison to Savannah's small, provincial environment. Atlanta, being a melting pot full of habitants from other places, is very open to everyone allowing endless opportunities for people to get involved. On the contrary, Renay noted that Savannah, as a small town, is not as welcoming to new members of the community. This was illustrated when she had a job interview at a bank and one of the questions was, "Who is your father?" She noted in all, Savannah was a great town and she was grateful for the experience to live somewhere other than just Atlanta - it was just a very eye opening experience having grown up in a large city. After her first marriage ended, which she transparently described as her "starter marriage," she moved back to Atlanta. Atlanta was home to her and she was ready to get back to a larger community.



Being back in Atlanta in the late 80's, her career took off. Although there was a recession and it was tough to get a job, she landed a job in state government. Renay admitted a few times that she never thought she would end up in government. However, that is the beauty of going where life takes you. She started out working in management auditing, focusing on efficiency and effectiveness for state agents. She then moved from there and worked in the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget as a budget and policy analyst, ultimately rising to the head of the section that managed all of the health and human services for the state.

Renay shared a very colorful anecdote about a time where she was conversing with the Governor at the time, Zell Miller, about the foster care system from a budgetary standpoint. She shared

that she kept talking to the governor and as he looked confused she continued to try to explain the issue. He then just walked away toward the window in the middle of her talking to him. Renay, confused, did not catch the cue from the Chief of Staff to stop talking. Unfortunately, Renay was embarrassed in front of her entire team as Zell Miller then let out some choice words toward her. Renay did not realize until after the fact, that when the Governor walks to the window, it means he is upset. The next week, Zell Miller asked Renay to elaborate on what she was explaining in the previous meeting. Renay, worried and not wanting to make the Governor mad again, mentioned to him that she would try not to send him to the window this time. Renay took a risk by saying that, as it is usually not advised to be so casual with someone of such high power especially when there is a lack of relationship (Renay mentioned earlier that she did not know the Governor in great capacity). However, her personable and warm demeanor is what made her stand out and from that point on, allowed her to have a wonderful relationship with Governor Miller. When Zell Miller retired, she gave the Governor a gift of a beautiful stained glass window. She accompanied the gift with a note assuring him that now, if anyone sent him to the window, he could have something beautiful to look at.

Renay learned so much from this experience, and while she faced a learning curve at times, she was able to stay true to herself. She reminded the audience that we are all people and no matter how high our position is or how much power someone has in comparison to us, “We should be real and authentic.” Giving the Governor the stained glass window as a gift was her way of staying authentic and recognizing the Governor as a human being rather than as someone in charge. Renay stated, “Even if we get intimidated by people, we can find a way to be our authentic and honest selves and work with them.”

As a word of advice, Renay communicated to the audience to never underestimate the power of notes. Even as an active, busy leader, Renay takes about 30 minutes out of each day to write personal notes to people. It is a small gesture that can show someone you care and can make their day. People truly want to feel valued and appreciated, and it is an important leadership quality to demonstrate genuine concern for others.

Renay’s next adventure within government was working for Roy Barnes in the budget department. As she prepared information for a particular meeting, she was informing him of what she gathered. Roy Barnes quickly made a decision without her information, but she still kept interrupting him trying to give him her standpoint. Once again, Renay realized that she probably made a mistake and upset the governor. However, much to her surprise, a few days later Roy Barnes asked Renay to be the State Policy Director. He claimed that he wanted someone who was not afraid to speak up. Renay was caught off guard as she thought she was going to be fired for continuously interrupting the Governor. Governor Barnes actually told Renay that he liked her spunk. He explained his reasoning by saying “I don’t like yes people, I want people to challenge me.” These were assuring words for Renay to hear. Renay was rewarded for her boldness and confidence to speak up, which are great skills for a leader to possess.

When speaking on leadership skills, Renay commented on how she admired Roy Barnes as a leader. She described him as always being calm, very personable and taking time for people. His

exemplary leadership style stood out to Renay. She also appreciated his consistency. Renay learned from Roy Barnes the importance of being a predictable leader. Renay exclaimed, "You never want people to guess what mood you will be in each day." Remaining consistent is key to effective leadership and saves plenty of guessing games.

Renay had one final adventure working in government before moving to the non-profit sector working for the Metro Atlanta Chamber and then the Grady Health Foundation. Her last government work was with Shirley Franklin as she worked tirelessly with her on the water sewer issue that was going on in Atlanta at the time. At this time, Renay was 3 months pregnant, and from this moment on she realized she had to find a balance between life and work. However, work continued to be demanding and Renay, having two toddlers years later, had trouble finding such balance. She mentioned that she does not even strive for work/life balance anymore but "work/life coordination." This is something working moms can probably relate to as Renay proclaimed, "I just hope I don't leave a kid anywhere." Renay was very genuine with the audience about the challenges she currently face trying to keep up with her now 8 and 5 year old children, being so involved with work. Her vulnerability allowed the audience to be able to connect with her on a personal level. It is always refreshing to know that you do not have to have a perfect life in order to be a successful leader. We all have weak areas, and Renay's ability to be open and honest about her hardships says a lot not only about her phenomenal leadership, but her character.

Despite her difficulties with trying to keep up with children while simultaneously impacting the Atlanta community, Renay did not give up. Renay's next step on her journey was with Grady Hospital as she worked for the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. Through the Chamber of Commerce, she worked to support key business leaders who were helping Grady stay in business. Grady was facing trouble with old equipment, beds that had not been replaced in years, and just overall poor conditions. The Chamber of Commerce went to the Fulton-DeKalb Hospital Authority and asked to be invited to help rebuild Grady. However problems arose when the Fulton-DeKalb community was concerned that the business community was just trying to use their money to take over Grady and destroy the historic mission of the hospital. Instead, the business community wanted to focus on systemic issues with Grady and help bring Grady back to life. Through this situation, Renay realized that the business community needed to first build a relationship with segments of the Fulton-DeKalb community so that there would be a sense of trust. Building relationships are a crucial first step in any collaborative efforts. A tipping point for Grady was when business people of Atlanta and the Woodruff Foundation worked together to donate over \$200 million to Grady, but only if the Fulton-DeKalb Hospital Authority would agree to the governance changes that they were initially hesitant about. They agreed, and six years later the trust was finally built. They had to first see the actions of the business community, rather than rely on their words. Now Grady is able to not only serve members of the Atlanta community without insurance, but is serving everyone who comes to its doors with world-class doctors and equipment. Grady has the leading stroke unit and even doctors from Piedmont and Northside Hospitals refer their patients to Grady. The Chamber of Commerce and business community did not give up and now they are able to see the fruit of their works.

Renay Blumenthal has a true passion for impacting the community, which is evident through her hard work. As Renay said, "Leadership is turning passion into action." Her passion for giving back to the community has truly developed her as a leader. She expressed her gratefulness for her career path that has allowed her to give back and stated, "You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give." Living in Atlanta, Renay has had an abundance of opportunities to sow into the community and become involved. Renay left the audience with some words of wisdom: "Wherever you are, do the best work you know. Be genuine, be authentic and you will get noticed. A successful person has great interpersonal skills, a strong work ethic and is smart." With those attributes you can get anywhere and learn anything, which is what Renay experienced through her career path from working with politicians to becoming the President of the Grady Health Foundation. She ended her talk with four rules of life:

1. Show up
  - Be engaged, don't be passive
2. Pay attention
  - Listen to people
  - God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason
  - You can always learn from someone
3. Tell the truth
  - Be open and transparent, genuine and authentic
4. Don't get attached to results
  - Nothing stays the same; failures happen but learn to move on

### **Question & Answer:**

You talked about how devastating it was when you had a big loss, how do you get past that feeling of failure?

- To be honest, I don't think I ever got past it. It was a very challenging and distracting point in my professional life. And at the time, I felt like I couldn't give any attention to my children and they were at such a critical age. You do find out who your friends are, and all you can do is continue to hold your head up high and be your genuine, authentic self. You think you're never going to climb out of this hole, but eventually you do, we moved on to new projects and you find out what you can do to move forward. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and I'm just at the point where I can look back and say, "Maybe that made me stronger."

What do you think about retirement for you personally? Do you think about it and when would that be?

- I'm 51, and I have an 8 year old and a 5 year old! You know, no I don't think about it, because I don't even know what I'm doing 5 minutes from now! I need to, though; we should all be conscious of financial planning, taking advantage of 401K and other investment opportunities, etc.

You've talked a lot about your kids and personal life and being a mom – how do you navigate the work-life coordination and being an older mom?

- I'm so blessed to be able to have had children as an older mom and I'm glad I waited because I have the wisdom and patience and resources but I DON'T have the energy. It wears me out. I still haven't adjusted to the amount of time it takes to give to both work and kids and feeling like I never have the energy to either one well.

How do you see work flexibility coming into play with the workplace?

- My philosophy with staff is that I'm compensating someone for results, not just time. So, I'll be flexible if someone needs to take an afternoon off or go to a child's activity, etc. – those things are so important and you never get those precious years back. As long as I'm getting results, and the person is not taking advantage, I'm okay with that flexibility. My advice when you're seeking a job where you need that flexibility is to just be honest about what you have to offer and be honest that you aren't always going to be in the office after 6 pm – manage expectations on both sides up front.

What is on your bucket list?

- I haven't done Disney World with the kids yet, so that's probably something to have on the list. I should probably take them before they're too old to enjoy it!

What is your greatest career victory?

- Helping with the Grady turnaround – so fulfilling and had such a great impact on our community. Being a part of that has been so rewarding, and I feel so passionate about what Grady does and the people we help every day.

With time at Chamber, employers coming to GA, challenges we have are transportation and education. Where are opportunities for GA for making education an easier sell?

- Education is the toughest nut to crack and also the most important one. Education is the great equalizer and is the path to empowerment and economic equality. At the end of the day, there's no silver bullet for education, but if there was one, we simply need the very best teachers teaching in the smallest classrooms as possible.

Have you always had a great sense of humor?

- No, I was a big time nerd- I was shy. Maybe it's just as you get older, you can allow yourself to be more authentic. You're always so scared or intimidated by authority or people in power when you're younger or just starting in your career, and feel like you have to fit a certain expectation. But being older, it's very freeing to feel like you can say what you want to say!