

Women in Leadership Highlights October 23, 2009



Elizabeth Kiss

“Educating Women To Live Honorably and To Make A Difference”- featuring Dr. Elizabeth Kiss, President of Agnes Scott College. Became ASC’s 8th president in 2006 and was the first recipient of Turknett’s Leadership Character Award in Education in 2008. Prior to ASC, Dr. Kiss was the founding director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics and an assoc. professor in political science and philosophy at Duke. Also taught at Princeton for 8 years. A former Rhodes Scholar, Dr. Kiss received her D. Philosophy from Oxford Univ. in England, has held fellowships at Harvard, the Nat’l Humanities Ctr. and at Melbourne Univ. She’s a sought after speaker on justice, human rights, and feminist theory; a trustee of Duke Univ., member of Rotary Club of Atl, and board member of SunTrust Bank and the Women’s College Coalition. Honors include Davidson College Distinguished Alumni Award and one of NW GA’s Girl Scout Council’s Women of Distinction.

ASC’s full mission statement is: to educate women to think deeply, to live honorably, and to engage the intellectual and challenging social issues of our times.

Dr. Kiss’s Life and Leadership Journey:

- Elizabeth’s parents – passionate advocates of democracy - were Hungarian refugees, part of the revolution there. Both parents experienced persecution, and her father was arrested by both the Nazi and Communist regimes and spent 3 years in jail. Later became a member of parliament.
- Values and principles –like the air that you breathe for her father, and just the way he lived his life. Became part of Elizabeth’s DNA as well. Like her father, she would become an activist for causes she believed in.
- She learned at an early age, e.g., in her church group at 13, that she could speak and influence others. Her life since then has been a journey of critical moments and experiences – church, college, study abroad, etc.
- At Davidson, the Honor Code had a tremendous impact and helped to shape her life thereafter. Later at Oxford her interest in women’s issues, leadership, and feminism began to emerge.

- One formative experience happened at a college trustee meeting where she made an impassioned speech re the institution's quota of "only 33%" women. One trustee said to her, "It's always nice to have a pretty girl at the meeting." Since then, she's reminded that... "We should not take for granted that we women are taken seriously..." Even today, there are times we have to struggle to be taken seriously.
- As she continued to mature, she became even stronger in her support of the empowerment of women, enjoying the company of other women, and that women "matter." In addition, her commitment to human rights, equality, education and ethics grew as well.
- Princeton experience: as a professor, she realized pretty quickly that it wasn't where she really wanted to be. Instead she took an assignment at an all male college called Deep Springs in California – a unique learning environment and setting with a grand total of 24 students! Her experience at Deep Springs helped her to redirect her career path. She had been part of a community and it was that feeling that she wanted to pursue.
- Soon, a new opportunity presented itself in the form of the Duke Ethics Center, a position she was primed for but really thought she would not get. Nevertheless, she took the risk, applied for it, and GOT it! Her experience at Duke turned out to be truly – ethics in practice – e.g., helping to establish character education K-12. She was in the academic world, but not fully, and also able to be somewhat of a social entrepreneur.
- And then, OUT OF THE BLUE, she got a call re Agnes Scott's presidency. Again she did not expect to get the job...but she did...and now she calls it "my dream job because it brings together all of the things that I'm passionate about..."
- In her current role, she gets to engage with and is energized by ALL TYPES of constituents and stakeholders, from students, to parents, to trustees, to faculty, etc.
- She has gone from a self-described ethics gadfly to an absolute ethics practitioner...and you could say, "The chickens have come home to roost."
- Everyday involves real learning experiences, trying to navigate among all the issues, considering the trade-offs, limited resources, tough economic conditions, transparency, providing encouragement, decision-making, and balancing roles as a leader.

Key Lessons:

- Find your passion, put it to work; create or shape a role to fit your passion if necessary.
- You're never as good as your best PR and never as bad as your worst PR. Seek common ground, listen, and learn to articulate and share your vision.
- Often your strongest critic can become your best ally.
- Keep your sense of humor because life's going to throw some curve balls!

Other ASC facts:

- Coming attractions: Women's Global Leadership Center plus a Global Girls' Summit

- 4 Fulbright Scholars this year: the 2nd highest percentage among undergraduate colleges
- 2 Goldwater Scholars this year – 1 more than GA Tech and the same as Harvard.
- Truman Scholar and DuPont Fellow
- 2 of 9 Harvard graduate student populations have “Scottie” presidents
- New Coed M.A.T. and Post-Bacc Pre-Med programs
- Examples of ASC grads: Chief Justice of the SC Supreme Court; first woman to head the Securities and Exchange Commission; CEOs; college professors; doctors; scientists; law school deans; politicians; community leaders; Pulitzer prize winners; award winning musicians; top architects and builders; etc
- Visit ASC website for more information www.agnesscott.edu