



Highlights: Women in Leadership – March 24, 2017

Dr. Robiaun Charles, vice president of college advancement at Agnes Scott College, was the featured speaker for Turknett’s 166th monthly seminar. Her topic was both compelling and inspiring – “From Plato to Philanthropy: Lessons in Leadership and Life.” In her introduction of Dr. Charles, Susan



Hitchcock – TLG’s Dir. of Women’s Initiatives and Board Member - said that some of the many characteristics attributed to Robiaun are “charismatic, strategic, and gregarious.” She is indeed all of that – and so much more. Every attendee benefited from her openness and her willingness to show vulnerability as a leader.

A southerner by birth, born and raised in Atlanta, Robiaun graduated from Frederick Douglass High School - a former engineering and technology magnet school in Atlanta.

She was privileged to grow up in a very supportive family, where expectations were high and excellence was modeled. Later in life, however, Robiaun learned that not all children were as fortunate. One example of that came during a volunteer experience in which she asked the children to write down some of their dreams for the future. She was stunned when one young boy shared what he’d written: “I dream of living to be 25.”

Other lessons came from Robiaun’s higher education journey which began at Rollins College in Florida – an overall experience she describes as “transformational” in her life. Early on, those around her recognized her leadership potential and they encouraged her to run for president of the Black Student Union while she was still a sophomore. “I honestly had not considered running,” Robiaun said, “but I did - and I won! This was definitely a lesson for me. Sometimes we don’t see our own potential, but others see it in us. As leaders it is our responsibility to let others know the potential we see in them.”

Robiaun went on to earn her undergraduate degree majoring in philosophy with a minor in African-American studies. She planned to pursue a career in public relations and to that end, she had several related internships. After graduation, when she was surprisingly “wait listed” on her first application for grad school, she got a job in a PR agency. This too was a valuable lesson and she learned that working in an agency actually wasn’t the right fit for her.

Next on her professional journey, she got her first position in a nonprofit organization, United Cerebral Palsy and later became an AmeriCorps volunteer. While with AmeriCorps she received a stipend for education and attended Georgia State where she earned her master’s degree in nonprofit administration.

Robiaun's professional journey also includes work with the Atlanta Symphony where her love of the arts was a wonderful match. But it also was a pivotal time when she came to realize that her true passion was in higher education.

Following her true passion, her next role was with Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C. It was here that Robiaun learned another valuable lesson – this time about confidence and leadership. While in her fundraising role she was the host and facilitator of a conference for volunteers. Her presentation included several changes to key policies. Unfortunately, she had not asked for input from anyone else and was immediately and publically called out by one of the attendees. "This was the most embarrassing moment of my life," Robiaun said, "and the lesson for me was clear. Be careful with over confidence. Seeking input from others / other constituents is key to getting buy-in and to good decision-making. Leaders cannot discount the insights, perspectives and ideas of others on their team."

After a promotion, Robiaun experienced yet another opportunity to learn about leadership. During a staff retreat, she was eager to share information – and so she talked a lot. In fact she was the only one who talked! "The feedback I received from that retreat was invaluable," she said, "and clearly I learned from it. Since then I've worked to develop a much more collaborative, consensus building leadership style, always seeking to listen to the input and ideas of others."

Among the other significant events in Robiaun's life was meeting and marrying Preston Charles. Together they moved to Indiana for his career. The town they lived in was one where there were only four black people, including her and her husband. This likely set the stage for a truly impactful and unexpected experience for Robiaun. "While in a line at Walmart one day, I was overtly ignored by the white person at the register. This affected me deeply," she said, "and for a while, I definitely had a 'chip on my shoulder.' But I got over it - and the lesson I would pass on is this – things happen to you but you don't have to carry around the negative baggage."

Fortunately, Robiaun and Preston moved on to the larger Evansville, Indiana, where Robiaun began working at the University of Evansville. Her experience in Evansville proved to be completely different, and in seven years when another opportunity came along, "I didn't want to leave!" she said. During a few of her years at the University of Evansville, Robiaun served as their Chief Diversity Officer. Once experience in that role reminded her of when she went to Russia on a study abroad trip prior to college. "I learned a valuable lesson about biases. Before the trip, I had very negative perceptions of Russian people from things I'd heard and read growing up during the Cold War, but – my actual experience was totally different. We all have biases and we have to constantly be aware not to judge others based on those biases."

In 2005, motherhood was added to Robiaun's "accomplishments" and her daughter, Camille, entered the world – which hasn't been the same since. "At first I was worried about my career progression and losing my professional edge. But I just had to learn more life lessons, e.g., (1) prioritization and (2) it's ok to ask for help."

The next big thing that came along professionally was an opportunity at The University of Texas in Austin. Leaving Evansville was not easy, but a family decision was made. Her experience in Austin brought new challenges including working in an environment outside her comfort zone – particularly in an “exclusive old boys’ network.”

This was also the time when she decided to return to graduate school for her doctorate. For three years, she flew to Nashville to attend Vanderbilt University – while juggling family and work responsibilities. But the light at the end of the tunnel proved to be well worth the effort when “Dr. Robiaun Charles” received her doctorate in higher education leadership and policy.

Fast forward, Robiaun moved to the Atlanta area in August 2015 to join the leadership team at Agnes Scott College. In December 2016 she and her advancement team brought the college’s \$100 million *Greatness Before Us* capital campaign to completion – finishing extremely strong with over \$116 million!!

In closing, Robiaun also shared more salient lessons and key take-aways:

“My grandmother always said ‘Morals never go out of style.’”

“High heels are my wonder woman accessory.”

“Listening is the top skill for anyone in fundraising – and in fact in any leadership role.”

“Everyone needs to know they’re valued – at every level of the organization.”

“Life is not a dress rehearsal. It’s game time.”

“We are the sculptors of our own lives.”

“Perfection – Let it go.”