



***Lisa A. Rossbacher, President
Southern Polytechnic State University – Atlanta, GA***

Leadership as Solid as a Rock

Not doing the expected could well be the theme of Lisa Rossbacher's life thus far. Considering where she is today, it would be difficult to guess the road she's taken to get here or the contributions she's made along the way. Suffice it to say, Lisa's been a very busy lady and an even busier leader.

A few highlights from her distinguished bio are all that's needed to illustrate that point. She's a Phi Beta Kappa, a Ph.D. from Princeton, a geologist, a researcher on the Mars Project, a finalist in NASA's astronaut selection program, a holistic thinker, an impassioned educator, and a prolific writer and author of dozens of articles and books on geology, science, and the media.

So much for the overview. Now to the real story of this multidimensional SHEro whose leadership and character are truly rock solid.

A strong family foundation

Lisa Rossbacher was born in Fredericksburg, VA although her parents actually lived about 30 miles away in a small town called Dahlgren. Her father was with the Defense Department doing research in what was then the Naval Weapons Lab. Her mother stayed at home to care for Lisa and her two younger siblings.

"I had a strong family life with plenty of discipline," Lisa said. I also had a great early education. From first through 8th grade, I attended a school that was half military and half civilian. *60 Minutes* did a story on the "Pentagon schools as they are called - about the positive impact they had on the children who attended. From personal experience, I'd have to agree." Later, her family moved to Fredericksburg where Lisa continued her excellence in academics and easily earned her diploma.

Higher education – the journey begins

Loving English as she did, the decision that came next was not what to major in, but rather what college to choose. The expected decision would have been to choose Swarthmore because she had an uncle who had been an English professor there and her boyfriend also attended there. But, remaining true to her nature of doing the unexpected, Lisa chose Dickinson College instead, where she literally knew no one.

At the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley in south central Pennsylvania lies a beautiful area that is home to Dickinson College, a small liberal arts school that would become home to Lisa for the next four years. "I remember signing up for a mandatory

lab science course where I was one of the last in line. I ended up taking geology,” Lisa explained

What a significant quirk of fate that turned out to be! It not only changed her educational path, but her entire life as well.

“What I love about the study of geology – and ultimately geomorphology – is the perspective it gives you, the scale of time and the larger scheme of things. Rocks tell the story of our environment. Geomorphology looks at the landscape and the process of creating it by wind, water, glaciers, landslides, etc. Once I got started in this field, there was no turning back,” Lisa said.

She graduated summa cum laude from Dickinson in 1975 with a B.S. in Geology. Her plans – to pursue teaching geology on the college level. She was also one course shy of a minor in English. (Note: Lisa’s love of writing and her talent for it have been a constant throughout her life. Her bio includes at least 150 pieces of creative and scholarly written work and she’s not done yet!)

After Dickinson, the next stop on Lisa’s “learning journey” was State University of New York at Binghamton where Lisa began her work on a Masters of Geological Sciences. It certainly wasn’t the climate that attracted her to upstate New York – or ultimately retained her. What did attract her was a certain female professor of geomorphology. However, even that wasn’t enough to keep Lisa there, as she longed for greater intellectual stimulation and a friendlier environment.

It was at that point that Dickinson College, her alma mater, offered her a faculty position, even before she completed her masters degree. She took the job and returned to Pennsylvania immediately. While teaching there, she was also able to finish her masters after completing her thesis about a rather unexpected subject, sinkholes. Yes – sinkholes. Her thesis was titled “Sinkhole development in the Shenandoah Valley around Lexington, VA.”

During the summer of 1978, Lisa pursued yet another unexpected opportunity, i.e., a NASA intern position in Planetary Geology in Flagstaff, AZ. This was an exhilarating learning experience - one of many more to come.

This experience was also beneficial in another way. It crystalized for Lisa that full time teaching wasn’t going to be her niche in life. Previously accepted at Princeton, she now decided to make it her first choice for post-graduate work. One compelling reason she chose Princeton was that the Chair of the Department of Geology was considered the geomorphologist in the US. Who wouldn’t have jumped at the chance to study with him and to get a second masters and ultimately, a Ph.D, from Princeton?

Mars and beyond

As a grad student, Lisa was given her choice of projects, either working on the Italian hillslopes OR studying the surface of Mars. She chose Mars. It was a time when NASA

was funding a number of projects each year, analyzing the abundant and exciting data that was being accumulated at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Cal Tech. According to Lisa, “This project really put me on the road to thinking holistically.”

Between 1978 and 1983, Lisa did myriad things including completing her doctoral thesis at Princeton. Her thesis was entitled “Geomorphic Studies of Mars.” During the same time period, she met the man who would become her husband and life partner, also a geologist and a professor at Whittier College. After they married, a wonderful opportunity came along for both to go to Europe to work and do research for a year.

While in Europe, however, Lisa had found out she was a finalist in NASA’s astronaut selection program. She was in Sweden when she received the official word that she didn’t make the cut. Officially, she was told that she needed to exhibit more interest in aviation. Could it have also been that NASA had never selected a college professor for the astronaut program?

Whatever the reason, it was providence at work.. Within 15 minutes of getting the rejection call from NASA, she received another a call. This one was from California State Polytechnic University at Pomona. They offered her a tenure-track faculty position teaching environmental geology and astronomy. Knowing that her husband would be at Whittier College not far away, Lisa accepted the offer and began an entirely new journey in higher education.

The road to leadership

Fast forward nine years to 1993. Lisa would leave Cal Poly for a position as Dean of Faculty and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Whittier College in Whittier, CA. Two years after that, she was asked to return to Pennsylvania to Dickinson College as Dean of the College, Professor of Geology, and Chair and Dean of the Faculty.

In retrospect, Lisa says that these moves were not very satisfying, but they were definitely important in helping her reach her ultimate destination. These experiences enabled Lisa to pinpoint what she did and did not want to do with her skills. “I knew I didn’t want to be an academic vice president or a dean. In fact, I was terrible in those jobs. My real strength is leadership and I wanted to be at the helm.”

Enter Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, GA. In 1998, Dr. Lisa A. Rossbacher became the second president and the first woman to head that institution which is located about 25 miles from downtown Atlanta. Since taking this position, Lisa says, “I have had a revelation about higher education. “The skill sets to be president are different than the sequence to get there.”

Being the holistic thinker that she is, Lisa also sees a link between geology and leadership. “There are things we’ll never know about the earth. We can drill down 5 miles and we know what’s there. But after that, it’s all inference. And that’s the

challenge in geology and in being a leader. There will always be incomplete data, yet one has to come to a conclusion or decision based on the best information available.”

After 5 years at Southern Polytechnic, Lisa is very proud of the direction the university is taking including the dramatic increase of female students (now 22%) and the third highest freshman SAT scores in the state university system. Despite funding issues and present economic conditions, she also believes that Georgia is making real progress in its effort to improve education overall. Personally she remains deeply committed to public higher education and to what she calls “the transforming power of education.”

“While I’d love for all students to want to come to our university, that really isn’t my goal. Getting people to college and having them get the best possible education is the ultimate goal. I like being a part of that process.”

And indeed she is a part of that process in Georgia. But she’s also extending her leadership to many other areas. She is currently a member of the Board of Directors of Charter Bank and Trust; board member for the Georgia Youth Science and Technology Centers; member of the executive committee of the Atlanta Regional Consortium for Higher Education; member of the Board of Directors for the YWCA of Cobb County and *WebGrrls* of Atlanta; member of the Advisory Board of the Metropolitan Atlanta Chamber of Commerce; Chair of Women’s Philanthropy and the Advisory Board of the United Way of Cobb County; and member of the Steering Committee of Cobb Executive Women. And the list goes on.

Professionally, Lisa has received numerous awards and honors throughout her career including one for “Outstanding Science Trade Book for Children Award from Children’s Book Council and National Science Teachers Association.” Clearly, recognition for her many accomplishments and contributions is well deserved, but it isn’t what motivates Lisa.

What does motivate her is learning, helping others to learn, and making a difference in higher education. At present, Lisa is co-author of a book tentatively titled “Leadership: Managing Chaos in Higher Education.” With her boundless energy and intellect, there are certainly more books ahead.

But whatever lies ahead for Lisa, one thing’s for sure: expect the unexpected and you won’t be disappointed.

By Susan B. Hitchcock, creator of The Age of SHEroes
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