

## **Being All That We Can Be**

Harold R. Holmes \*

My career path can best be described as “unconventional” or “non-traditional” for a senior student affairs administrator. I am a native son of New York City (the community of Harlem), with parents who moved there from Norfolk, VA (Dad), and Lake Charles, LA (Mom). They met and married and produced two sons, of which I am the oldest. My elementary and secondary schooling was through the parochial system, with a four-year undergraduate business degree from Hampton University, and a return to New York for graduate study at Fordham University (MBA-Management).

Being a first-generation college graduate, my focus was on what I will characterize as a “clear cut career path” for a Myers Briggs ESTJ: management and banking. Also, along the way, while at Hampton, I met and married my wife of now 36 years.

Our lives after college gradation initially consisted of early career opportunities in banking and insurance in New York where we lived for our first six years. Midway into our time in the city, we set in motion a deliberate plan to relocate to North Carolina. Our objective was achieved with my securing a position in Winston-Salem in the banking industry, and my wife gained employment with a local insurance company. Our rationale for the relocation plan was to enhance our quality of life experiences professionally and personally since our “family unit” now consisted of two daughters. This experience was our first purposeful effort at achieving a greater degree of balance holistically for our family.

I spent almost 12 years in the banking industry in Winston-Salem, the last 10 as a regional human resource manager. This move from a line to a staff position early in my career at the bank was recognition on my part that I achieved a greater degree of fulfillment and satisfaction in those professional situations that are based upon human relations activities.

My transition to higher education administration and student affairs began with my appointment as director of career services at Wake Forest in 1987. This opportunity, as I made the decision to change careers, was simply moving from the helping profession for older adults to providing advice and counsel for a

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\* *Harold R. Holmes is associate vice president/dean of student services at Wake Forest University. Correspondence regarding this reflection should be sent to [holmes@wfu.edu](mailto:holmes@wfu.edu).*

younger adult demographic. This change in career came with the added benefit of being able to “walk in both worlds,” counseling college students and continuing to develop and nurture a portfolio of recruiting relationships in the public and private sectors while creating opportunities in the non-profit arena.

Ten months into my relatively new profession, I was offered the proverbial golden opportunity, of assuming day-to-day management responsibility for the Wake Forest Division of Student Life. I felt grateful to be selected, but I assumed this position humbly and with much trepidation. My transition into this role was augmented by opportunities for experiencing the Carnegie Mellon College Management Program and the Harvard Management Development program in ensuing years. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have been afforded numerous community, civic, church, and professional leadership experiences that have added to a sense of satisfaction in being able to contribute to “something greater than oneself” in all areas of my being.

While all of the chapters of my life were evolving, I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to parenting, as my parents had to my brother and me. Simply put, they were always there for us, supporting every church and school activity, Cubs and Boy Scout events, athletic events, graduations, and any other involvements we had. While it has occasionally caused me to have a significant stretch to balance everything, my wife and children are the reasons that any career is worth having. Both my wife and I can take satisfaction in knowing that we have done the utmost to instill in our children that while the pursuit of excellence in one’s professional life is vitally important, the ultimate measure of our true worth will be the nurturing and supportive atmosphere and environment created in our family. Doing so has enabled our daughters to maximize themselves to the degree that their talents and energy afforded them. My wife actually retired from her career in the insurance industry on the occasion of the birth of our first-born grandson, to provide the day care and overall support and development that we believed is so critical in those formative years.

Today we live by the adage of “playing with the hand that you are dealt.” We now have our oldest daughter and two grandchildren, ages five and six, living with us as a result of a dysfunctional and failed marriage. Having them in our home has resulted in some wonderful family interaction; however, for two baby boomer grandparents, it has presented us with a completely new set of opportunities and challenges, as we reevaluate what retirement means for us. Currently, my wife provides day care for the toddler grandson of our youngest daughter, and our daughter recently informed us of another blessed event to occur about eight months from this writing.

I now find myself at elementary school parent-teacher conferences, serving on the PTA Executive Committee and the Parent Advisory Council for our city/county school system. I feel that I owe my grandchildren every bit as much effort as my wife and I put forth as parents in times past. I constantly reflect on a simple statement that my Mom would make to my Dad when they would have discussions about family issues which revolved around financial or other support issues dealing with my brother and me. She would say to him, "They did not ask to come here." While this is a simple statement, it has huge implications in terms of the responsibility parents (and now, for us, grandparents) assume during life's journey.

Whenever I start to feel stretched thin and ask myself, "Can I juggle it all?" I think of the statement my then-five-year-old grandson made to me one day as I was helping him with a project. He turned to me and said, "Pa Pa, you're my best friend." This statement, made with no ulterior motives other than true love and affection and "from the mouth of babes," means more to me than any compensation, title, or other career accolade. For me, it means that I am, at least through my family and extended family, attempting to leave this place better than I found it. This epitaph and banner is one I proudly accept if so accorded.