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Road To BIS

The Gayle Evans Story

It was never a question on whether I would go to college or not. My father instilled in my siblings and me the importance of furthering our education and getting a good job so we didn't have to do end up working in a factory like he had his whole life. I witnessed for years the absolute misery my dad had with his job. He complained about it, he detested it. I knew that I never wanted to be in that situation.

I also knew the importance of being self-sufficient. My parents were believers that I should pay for things that I wanted and not ask them for money. While they supplied the necessities such as shelter and food, anything else was my responsibility. Because of this, I started working when I was fourteen years old. I rode my bike into town, which was about fifteen miles each way, and worked all summer at Dairy Queen. I earned enough money that summer to pay for my school clothes and other spending money I needed through-out the school year. I worked there the next summer as well.

The summer before my freshman year in high school, my sister helped me get a job at a local vacation resort where she worked and which was nearer to my home. I started out as a chamber maid cleaning rooms. I worked for the next five summers at this resort, moving my way up the ladder to kitchen staff, then waitress and finally dining room manager. This was the job that truly started my love for management and for work in hospitality. I was the youngest dining room manager they had ever had, and I did so well at this position.

I graduated from high school in 1984, as a very average student. What I didn't show in my grades, though, I over compensated for in my extracurricular activities. I was Class President for three years, a basketball and football cheerleader for four years, a competitive cheerleader, and a wrestlerette for three years, Presidents Club member, student exchange program and more. I loved to be involved.

Upon graduation I decided to go to Ferris State University (it was actually still Ferris State College then). Like many decisions in my life, I made that one quickly and without much thought. My mom and stepfather lived in Big Rapids so I thought it would be nice to go to school near them since I had lived with my dad most of my life.

I really had no idea what I wanted to do for a career, and changed my degree plans three times in my first two years before I finally decided to major in Criminal Justice Law Enforcement. Thinking back, I can't even recall why I chose that. I think I was going through the Ferris Course Catalog and that seemed the most interesting. For me, it was a challenge at nineteen years old trying to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I spent five years at Ferris, as a very average student. Again, what I didn't show in my grades, I over compensated for in my extra curricular activities. I made the cheerleading squad as a freshman (which was very rare since I had to actually try out in the spring of my senior year in high school). I cheered for the football season, and then unfortunately had to stop due to my job. I was working as a cashier at a grocery store, and most of the hours that were available were on weekends, which conflicted with game schedules for cheer. I needed to work to pay for school and housing, so the path chosen at that point was work.

I was in a sorority and held many leadership positions. I was President of the Panhellenic Council and a member of a business Fraternity. Again, I loved to be involved. This is something I will carry with me throughout the years.

I worked three jobs my freshman and sophomore years at Ferris just to make ends meet. Then, finally I was able to get a job waitressing at a local restaurant. This allowed me to finally only work only one job. I worked there for just a year, and was offered a shift manager position at another local restaurant. I jumped at that offer, and started down another path. For the next couple of years, I worked full time, went to school full time and stayed involved in my many activities. Life seemed good. But, I still had no idea what I really wanted to do once I was done with college. I was going through the motions every day, doing what I was supposed to be doing. But I didn't have a plan for anything further than the next day.

Interestingly, what I didn't recognize back then, which seems so evident to me now, was what great work ethic I had and how that would lead me through life well. I knew I wasn't a great student, only doing what I needed to do to get by, but it was my work ethic that excelled and would continue to drive my decisions in years to come.

My senior year came. It was time to decide on what my next steps would be. I knew in my heart that Criminal Justice was not for me. I had done the first half of my internship that summer, and I knew first hand that I would not be happy doing this work. I was at that point in the road that Robert Frost talks about in his "The Road Not Taken". I was staring down two paths deciding which I would take. One path would lead me to continue in school, with another degree choice and more years of schooling. The other path would lead me into the work force, to earn some money and start a career.

I happened to go to a job fair with my roommate one day, just to "look around". I started talking with a recruiter from a national restaurant chain, and he was impressed with my many years of restaurant management experience. He scheduled me for a series of interviews the next day. I was offered a position and my first assignment was in New York. It was then that I chose which path to take.

I left Ferris my senior year, with two classes short of my Bachelors Degree in Criminal Justice. A decision that will weigh on me for years.

I worked for that New York restaurant chain for five years, working my way up to different positions in marketing. I was married in 1992, moved back to Michigan and had my first child in 1993. At that point I wanted to be home more, so I accepted a job with another restaurant chain doing local media buying for them part time. I was with them for six years, and it was the best job to have for that time in my life. I had two more children and was able to continue to work part time while still doing a job that I loved. I even took some classes at Western Michigan University, still thinking that I wanted to get a Bachelors Degree.

When my youngest son was a year old, I was offered yet another position that I couldn't resist. It was with a regional restaurant chain as an assistant marketing director. It was a dream job, handling the marketing and media needs for a 52-store chain. I worked there for six years. It was this job that I met my mentor, who inspired me in ways I can never repay. As in my past jobs, I was promoted quickly to Marketing Director. My boss (and mentor) recognized that I had a true passion for work. I didn't just want to be there and do my job, but I wanted to be there and make a difference in my job. It was my boss/mentor that encouraged me to keep reaching for what I wanted and that he knew that I had even bigger dreams than this company.

Unfortunately, my boss/mentor passed away suddenly. As hard as that was, his words and encouragement will never be forgotten. It was a week after his funeral that I went home and told my husband that I was going to open my own media buying agency. I had been managing the media agencies for my company for the past couple of years, and I knew that there was an opportunity for a West Michigan based media agency that would specialize in small business. Again, like most decisions, I jumped in feet first. I didn't have a business plan or any sales forecasts. I just picked a name and incorporated myself and two weeks later I opened, just two months after the 9-11 tragedy.

For eleven years I ran my own successful media agency. The experience and growth during that path were more than I could begin to cover in this paper. I was immersed not only in the skills that I had been doing of marketing and media buying, but I also was getting a crash course in business management, business law, human resources, payroll, accounting and more. I had the ups and downs of any small business. There were sudden growth spurts of which I had eight employees, to moderate years where I had to have the unfortunate time of letting employees go. There were great cash flow years, and other more lean years. It was during this entrepreneurial path that I could really relate to Portia Nelson's "Five Short Acts", as sometimes it took me a couple times of falling in that same hole to understand that I really need to just take another street to get to my destination.

It was during this past eleven years that I finally had a grasp of who I was professionally. For the first time in my life, I was at a point that I could see clearly what my strengths were. I was in the midst of some self reflection and what I thought the next steps for my company would be when I was approached by a recruiter. She had a client who was looking for a media buyer that could help them with a six-month assignment, and she wondered if I would be interested. Absolutely I said. I would never turn down a new

piece of business. My thought at the time was that hopefully a six-month assignment would lead to a new client for my agency.

I started the assignment, and within just a couple of months I was approached by the Director of the company that I was doing the project for. He was pleased with the project thus far and could see the value I could bring to his team with my experience and knowledge. He wanted to know if I would consider a full time offer for a career with the company.

So, again I sat staring down two paths. One of continued business ownership and the other of a career with a large international company. I gave this decision a lot of thought and reflection. This was a big decision and one I wanted to be sure of.

I chose a path. I am now working in the Global Indirect Procurement department as a Sourcing Manager for all marketing and media Services for one of the largest privately held international companies in the world. I just returned from Moscow as I assisted our office there secure a contract for a new Media Agency for the Russian Market. Other international and national trips to follow.

While the decision to take this path has been very positive, not having my Bachelors Degree is still a regret. I don't regret not working in Criminal Justice and changing my mind about that degree. But, I do regret not being able to say "I did it." I have a degree. I can look back and know that I wasn't focused on school, but over the years I have grown in so many ways. I see the importance of education and how it drives us.

That's what led me to the BIS. I wanted to finish up my Bachelors Degree so I can continue on with my Masters.

I contacted Ferris to discuss what I needed to do to finish my degree. I thought I was going to have to actually finish up in Criminal Justice since I was only two classes short. When I was told about the BIS program, I was thrilled.

The paths taken in my personal and professional life has been filled with opportunities, successes, and layers of experience and personal growth. Each decision and opportunity led me to something greater. I'm on such an exciting path right now and as far as I can see, the path seems straight. But, I wouldn't be surprised if when I least expect it, another path diverges into this one and I will once again be faced with a decision.