Rhodes Panel on Success

September 19, 2013

At 58, I am advised that I am the oldest female Rhodes Scholar. I am not sure what the significance of this is but as people keep telling me this, in the interests of full disclosure, I mention it here.

I didn’t get a Rhodes when I applied in 1977, the first year for women. After I lost, the head of the New Jersey committee, Malcolm Forbes, came up to me and said they had chosen an Olympic swimmer over me for the “female” slot, but consoled me by saying: “You know, you could make some man Senator someday!” My reply wasn’t strictly true, but it was the only proper one under the circumstances: I said, “But Malcolm, you see, I want to be senator someday!” He said: “Damn it!, that’s what we didn’t understand about you!”

So the question of what it meant to be a “successful” woman Rhodes Scholar was fairly sharply defined for me even before I became one.

I had a wonderful, even magical, time during my Rhodes and remain extremely grateful for the experience and the opportunities it has given me.

Nevertheless, ever since this period, I have been intrigued by what success means for able and ambitious women –

how do we conceive it?

how do we achieve it?

what are the trade offs?

how do we compare to the men?

These questions have interested me enough that I started the Rhodes Project in 2005: a systematic study of Rhodes women’s career paths, hoping to illuminate what success means for women in the modern era more broadly, by examining women who are in some sense pre-certified by the selection committees as already possessing important attributes of success.

We’ve administered two substantial questionnaires to more than 300 Rhodes women, have conducted more than 100 lengthy interviews, more than 200 informal interviews and have engaged distinguished academics, Dr. Susan Rudy and Dr. Kate Blackmon, to write articles and books from the data –

I’m delighted to be able to report that our book proposal was just accepted yesterday by Oxford University Press.

Some here have participated as subjects, for which I thank you.

We also have an active web presence, including a large number of short profiles of women Rhodes Scholars.

Everyone is welcome to see more of our work at our headquarters at Linacre College three minutes away at the bottom of South Parks Road, where we’re also conducting more interviews for our profile series and our new video series, and you’re very welcome to take part.

At this point I want to switch direction slightly, before coming back to talk about the Rhodes Project data, to talk about my own career, which provides some backdrop for the larger story of Rhodes women the data illuminate.

I’m one of the Rhodes women who has pursued a legal career, and achieved some success, having made $60 million so far from my businesses. I think the big money is still in front of me. I hope it is.

I run two law firms.

The first firm -- McAllister Olivarius -- does commercial and transactional work on both sides of the Atlantic. We have achieved landmark results in our employment work, much of it representing senior women who hit the glass ceiling.

Interestingly, we represent more Rhodes Scholars –I would wager than any other law firm. We have also represented a cast of other high profile individuals, including Nelson Mandela and Queen Rania of Jordan.

I also run a second law firm, my thank you for the successes we have enjoyed at McAllister Olivarius, which combats child sexual abuse. Most of our cases are currently against the Catholic Church for protecting its paedophile priests.

At a previous Rhodes Reunion, there was a conversation started very interestingly by Bonnie St. John about whether women were redefining success so that it was not “Big S” success, traditional fame and fortune, but “little S” success, meaning a more comprehensive kind of happiness based partly on career success but also motherhood and community contributions.

I’ve tended to dislike this way of framing the argument; and sympathetic to the observation of my classmate Nadine Baudot-Trajtenberg, who said: “To hell with small-s success! Who gets a Rhodes Scholarship for small-s success?”

So with this backdrop, I’m going to talk about what the rich data we’ve collected show how women Rhodes Scholars themselves think about success.

One of the things that stands out about the vast majority of Rhodes women is that that are comfortable in their own skin. We have asked detailed questions about their choice of career, of partners, children. We have enquired as to their politics, the money that they earn, about their health, their exercise programs and diets, their sex lives and whether they have had plastic surgery. Throughout all, we have been greeted with frank honesty, even when they discuss their failures, depressions and tragedies.

There has been talk for some time that Rhodes women weren’t measuring up to the men. Phil Zeigler’s very fine history of the Trust, out five years ago, mentioned women only once, on page 312, in the context of posing a question whether Rhodes women had reduced the average “worldly success” quotient of the Rhodes brand.

I think the first cohorts of women have now reached a stage of seniority in their careers where this argument becomes pretty difficult to sustain. We’ve produced

* the National Security Advisor and former UN ambassador Susan Rice;
* head of the US Office of Management and Budget Sylvia Matthews Burwell;
* the broadcaster Rachel Maddow;
* Michelle Johnson, first female head of the Air Force Academy;
* Maura Smith, former general counsel of Pepsi;
* Heather Wilson, former Representative from New Mexico;
* Chrystia Freeland, [[who as you’ve heard]] is now running for parliament in Canada; and
* many others at the top tier of their professions.

I apologize to many here whose names I have left out.

Of our sample of women Rhodes scholars,

78% consider themselves successful;

12% don’t.

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Asked “which of the following elements figure most prominently in your definition of “success?” with people allowed to check as many as applied, these were the answers:

Being famous: 6%.

Having a big impact: 56%.

Being a respected leader in your profession: 72%.

Having a fulfilling life partnership: 77%.

Being inwardly satisfied: 88%.

The thrust of these responses is that Rhodes women are not defining success simply as getting to the top of the greasy pole, but trying to make the climb meaningful. Success is not defined solely in terms of Big-S success, the obvious measures of money and power, but as an all-in measure of a whole life well lived.

Almost all the women Rhodes Scholars I have spoken to in the context of this study have volunteered that they feel an obligation to step up, to lean in (as Sheryl Sandberg would say) to their gifts and to use them to best effect, to make a contribution to the world.

Indeed, many Rhodes women have been drawn to public careers.

Asked “what type of organization do you hope to work for at the high point of your career,”

36% said government, which was higher than any other category.

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This tracks another answer: “how important is it to you to make money?”

63% said it was important

33% said not very important.

In the interviews I’ve conducted, money was not talked about as something to boast about; money for money’s sake, to be rich, no one said was their goal; instead it was a great tool, a utilitarian expedient, to buy time and ease to do their life’s work.

Rhodes women certainly work hard:

a full 30% said they worked 51-70 hours a week.

But there is still inequality in our homes.

The average female Rhodes School makes more than $100,000/year

[When we remove the outliers of those who make in excess of $1 million/year – and there are a number who consistently do --]

Half of our respondents earn the same as their partners, while of the remaining half, it’s evenly split between those who earn more and those who earn less than their partners.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of first generation female Rhodes Scholars report that they bear a bigger load at home and this rebounds into their work life.

81% of Rhodes women who are mothers said they had "limited or turned down career opportunities because of their children"

while only 43% of their (mostly male) partners had.

48% said they found it harder to get promoted or recognized at work because they were female,

and of that group, almost 90% said they felt that was due to having children.

The imbalance of responsibilities with their partners and husbands was often discussed with some humour – it is probably the most difficult and sensitive issue amongst this group.

A fascinating finding for the earliest Rhodes Scholar women is that many of us were NOT nurtured by our parents or our schools for success, were ignored or overlooked in high school, and were certainly on no predetermined path to success;

The headline in Maura Smith’s hometown paper when she won the Scholarship in 1977 captures something about this: “Dumb Blonde Wins Rhodes.”

So far, our research has found very few Rhodes women from the early years who reports being nurtured and encouraged in the way one might expect.

This contrasts with the example of one of the most prominent Rhodes Scholars of my generation, a man, whose achievements I applaud. In his Wikipedia entry we learn that his parents were both lawyers.

He was captain of the math team at Stuyvesant High School and an International mathematical Olympiad Silver medallist for the United States, graduating from high school in 1974. At the age of 17, he wrote a paper on quasiperfect numbers for which he won the Westinghouse Prize.

Clearly somebody took a very keen interest in his success and he was pushed and encouraged to take on more and bigger challenges from the start – which turns out not to have been the case for many of the Rhodes women of our generation.

Plus, we get continuing reports from Rhodes women that they are facing old fashioned discrimination at work, which I see in my own law practice all the time for very senior women, even today;

in addition to the more subtle problems of being expected to do more at home.

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I think this might be summarized by saying that our women’s careers are not as linear as men’s in their approach to Big-S success. In general, we didn’t get the support in our early years and so got started later, have more family responsibilities and more hits from discrimination along the way –

but now, when everyone is living longer and everyone’s careers tend to involve more job changes and fluidity than before, women can remain in the running through their 50s, 60s or 70s, health allowing.

We come to fruition later, but we are still getting there.

I like these remarks from one early Rhodes Scholar, which capture the complexity of her career, but also her determination to continue making the most of her opportunities:

“As to my individual road to success, I did not quite make it to the top of my field, neither in academia nor in business, but I have an unusually good package of occupations (even more so given that my life has been lived in a different country, different language; golf players would certainly have given me a certain handicap).

“I have served as associate dean and chairman of the investment committee of a large insurance company and chairman of the board of a small Luxembourg Bank and director of an international real estate company.

“Time is of course the constraint given that I am the main breadwinner..., not only, but main.”

“I am still thinking of writing a few things.

“I am not done yet!”

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I will end by noting the example of Bill Clinton, the archetypal male Rhodes Scholar success story of our times. He reached the heights of power and world influence. He has had the Biggest S success job, some might say in the world.

And now Hilary may well get there too, after a lot of side steps, diversion, attacks on her personal choices, what she accepts in her marriage and her hair styles. That may mean that *her* non-linear progression for the biggest S office in the world might not succeed – but it might well mean she is better prepared and seasoned for it if she gets there.

I hope so.

Thank you.