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Lisa Stone

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A Retirement Tribute to Robin Buchannon

So Long, My Boss, My Mentor, My Friend

JUNE 29, 2018 BY LISA STONE



I've known for many months that my boss and my friend, Robin Buchannon, associate vice chancellor for university relations, was retiring after 34 years at Ole Miss. This day was coming, and, despite my constant cajoling and begging, there was nothing I could do to change it.

So, as a writer, I figured the next best thing I could do was to pen a tribute to her from my perspective as one of her longest employees and mentees.

Rock-solid

My first interaction with Robin came when I worked in Old Chemistry (now Brevard Hall) in the 1990s. I have vague memories of the very nice, soft-spoken blonde woman who worked on the second floor. I didn't really know much about her other than she was Bob Woolsey's right hand in the Mississippi Mineral Resources Institute.

So, for those of you who don't know, Robin came to Ole Miss in 1981 as a graduate assistant in the Department of Geology and Geological Engineering. She went on to earn her M.S. in Geology and her Ph.D. in Engineering Sciences from Ole Miss before assuming roles of research assistant professor and associate director and research geologist in MMR. She's a registered professional geologist and, for many years, chaired the program committee for the Offshore Technology Conference for the Society of Mining, Metallurgy and Exploration.

I guess you can trace the roots of her rock-solid reputation back to her academic beginnings!

The Permanent Interim

I didn't really know Robin during the first half of her career at Ole Miss as a geologist. Rather, for the last 16 years, I have known her as a stellar supervisor, an exceptional role model and an administrator extraordinaire. In fact, I have very succinct memories of Robin from 2002, when she assumed the role of interim administrative director of the Mississippi Space Commerce Initiative. It was the first time that Robin was asked to step up into an interim role to be the steady hand to guide a struggling program, but it wouldn't be the last.

In fact, over the next 15 years, Robin would serve in special assignment leadership roles for more than five programs, centers and departments. The extent of her knowledge ranges from remote sensing to economic development to food services and a little bit of everything else in between!

Some of her greatest successes came during her time in the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, including being named assistant vice chancellor in 2008. During this time, she never met a budget she didn't like and honed her airtight knowledge of institutional policies and procedures. Robin was also instrumental in enhancing the credentials of the department by encouraging and supporting staff to follow in her footsteps and become Certified Research Administrators – it was the first time in the history of UM that such a level of external credentialing had been achieved by the staff of the sponsored programs administration.

A Tough Exterior

I know that many see Robin as a tough nut to crack – and she is. But it was because she always did things the right way: following and enforcing policies and procedures, holding people accountable and handling the most difficult and challenging situations with a quiet, assured confidence. She approached



Robin Buchannon and husband, Denny, stop for a quick break during a hike in Patagonia this past February. Submitted photo

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Students Learn 'Real Politics' in Washington, D.C., Winter Session

OXFORD, Miss. – Eleven University of Mississippi students spent their winter break learning about the people who work behind the scenes of the American government in Washington, D.C. Lead by Jonathan Klingler, assistant professor of political science, the students of Pol 391: Applied Politics met not with candidates, but with the people who make candidates'

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OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to abate. The Federal Reserve's

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Robin Buchannon and husband, Denny, enjoy cake during an Office of Research celebration thanking Robin for her many years of service before she transitioned to University Relations. Photo by Robert Jordan/Ole Miss Communications

every aspect of her job with the utmost integrity, always keeping the university's best interest as her guiding principle. It was never in doubt that she truly loves this university.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones who got beyond that tough exterior and had the privilege of knowing her as a friend. Over the last 16 years, we've shared long lunches and fun dinners. We've shared tailgating Saturdays in the Grove. We've shared shopping trips and birthday gifts. And maybe best of all, we've shared our love of birthday cake!

Superpowers

Whether or not she intentionally set out to be a role model for others, for me, Robin has served as one of the outstanding women at this university whom I have tried to emulate and learn from. Alice Clark is another one of these remarkable women, but that is a story for another day.

Over the last 16 years, Robin has nurtured my potential and encouraged me to learn more, take on more responsibility and aim for the next steps in my career at the university. She had great confidence in me, always recognizing my abilities and talents way before I knew I was ready.

Her knowledge of this university is unsurpassed. She has amazing working relationships across every aspect of UM and is widely respected. In the face of working in some of the most challenging situations, I can't ever remember Robin being ruffled – I think her superpower is her steady, even-tempered, calming influence. But keep an eye out ... if you are ever lucky enough to get a glimpse of her sense of humor, she is wickedly funny!

Bet You Didn't Know

So, while Robin's reputation for being the epitome of grace under pressure may be widely known, you may not know that she and her husband, Denny, are avid travelers. In fact, they've traveled to more than 20 countries. Their travels have included climbing to basecamp at Mount Everest and hiking in Patagonia. They've even been known to hop on a last-minute flight to spend the weekend in Paris!

In addition to traveling, she is passionate about music – the Beatles and Paul McCartney in particular. Did you know that she has been to 13 Paul McCartney concerts in four countries?

But perhaps she is most truly passionate about her relationships. Whether it is her volunteer work with the Pilot Club, the friendships she has nurtured over many years, her beloved nieces and nephews, or her feisty cats, Robin is genuine, giving and loyal. I am grateful that my professional life brought with it one of my most treasured friendships.

A Well-deserved Rest

In 2016, Robin was ready to take it to the house. She had enjoyed a magnificent career full of exceptional achievements. But her beloved university called her to serve once more. This time – for her swan song – Robin would serve as associate vice chancellor for university relations to round out an already stellar career.

I can already see her now, sitting on her back porch enjoying the solitude of no HR forms to process or budgets to reconcile. Or, I can see her making the rounds of visiting friends and family far and wide. Or, I can see her jetting to far-off, exotic places. Well, Robin, whatever you choose to do, here's to all your many, well-deserved future adventures.

And although a decade-and-a-half was not enough time to learn all I could from you, I'm so very grateful that I was able to spend such a significant part of my Ole Miss adventure with you.

Telling Her Story

For those familiar with the wildly popular Broadway show "Hamilton," there is a very poignant tune about who will tell your story, how it's the people who remember you who shape your legacy. In keeping with this theme, I reached out to a several people who have had the distinct privilege of working with Robin over her many years at Ole Miss. Here is how they will tell her story...

"Robin has an amazing ability to resolve complex issues in a quiet, professional manner. I worked closely with Robin for 14 years and admired her ability to analyze a situation and quickly get to the heart of the matter. She involved as few people as absolutely necessary to develop a plan forward and always approached situations with the mindset of 'what is best for the university.' She also has a great sense of humor and knows when to use it to put others at ease.

"I know it is a cliché, but Robin is irreplaceable, and deserves a tremendous amount of credit for building the research infrastructure that is needed to manage an R1 research enterprise."

– *Walter G. Chambliss, interim associate vice chancellor for research and sponsored programs and professor of pharmaceuticals and drug delivery*

"Robin was one of the first people that I met when I came to the University of Mississippi in 1995. Over the years, we have worked together on many different initiatives and projects. Robin and I spent many hours in car rides to the Stennis Space Center, as part of 'Driving Miss Robin,' and during those drives we developed a warm friendship. She has always been a trusted friend that I could go to for advice and counsel. I always appreciated her candor, her advice and her support. The University of Mississippi and I will miss having her on campus."

– *Greg Easson, director and professor, Mississippi Mineral Resources Institute, and associate dean for research and graduate education*

"Sometimes it is hard to find the right words to acknowledge and describe someone as wonderful as Dr. B. I met her in 2002 while working at Stennis Space Center for the Mississippi Space Commerce Initiative when she was introduced as our interim director. It was evident during our first meeting that she was a person who truly cared about her job, the university and its mission.

"She is one of the most dedicated people I've ever met – strong and soft-spoken. I'd like to thank her for being my inspiration, for helping me grow and become the person I am today. She's truly one of a kind, a leader who makes everyone else stronger. I've never been able to call her Robin as I preferred Dr. B., but I will forever call her my friend."

– *Christine Narcisse, retired*

"I met Robin for the first time on a group trip to Tuscany, Italy. It was an eclectic mix of people and personalities, and it was truly an adventure from beginning to end. Many fond memories were made through cooking classes, wine tastings, goat farms, chocolate and quirky tour guides. Looking back, I realize that I was one of the lucky few who got to know Robin while pursuing one of her true passions: travel!

"Two years later, Robin and I would cross paths again when Dr. Clark was named vice chancellor for university relations. Initially, I joked with her that she probably didn't want to see me again after 'Italy,' but you learn important things about people when you travel with them and when you work with them. In the short time we worked together, we celebrated small victories, struggled through difficult times and she taught me to approach each new challenge fearlessly – with an open heart and mind.

"From those experiences, I learned that Robin has strength, character and grace that I will strive to emulate for the rest of my career. I'm truly grateful to call Robin a mentor, friend and personal hero!"

– *Lauren Beyers, executive director of advancement services, University Development*

"I had the pleasure of working with Dr. Buchannon during the final two years of her career at the university. In that short time, I found her grace, candor and sharp wit to be unmatched; her commitment to this university to be unparalleled; and her trust to be inspiring. Dr. Buchannon is a true servant leader. My only regret is that I didn't get to work with her longer than I did. Her impact at Ole Miss will be felt long after she's retired to her next great adventure."

– *Ryan Whittington, director of marketing and brand strategy, University Communications*

"It's impossible to sum up Robin Buchannon's impact on our university in a short statement. There is no one I respect more, value more or trust more than Robin. She embodies all that we hope for in a colleague and a friend: she's trustworthy, thoughtful, honest, knowledgeable, dependable, loyal and a delight to work with every day. Day after day, year after year, it's people like Robin Buchannon who have worked hard to shape the acclaimed Ole Miss culture of integrity, quality, helpfulness and a commitment to the greater good.

"She is highly respected across campus, is always professional, kind and helpful to all, knows everything about everything (or where to find it), is willing to take on any job asked of her and can solve any problem. She has been a gift to our university, and her absence will be deeply felt throughout the university."

– Alice Clark, *interim vice chancellor for university relations and F.A.P. Barnard Distinguished Professor of Pharmacognosy*

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