



Phillips Memorial Hall, West Chester University

november inspiration...the kindness of strangers

"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Earlier this fall I was asked by my university, to be their *Entrepreneur in Residence* for the 2017/2018 school year. I have to say, I was quite surprised, as I think of myself as a designer and although my design business falls into the entrepreneurial category, (one who organizes, manages and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise) it has never been how I define myself.

When they contacted me, I was told if I accepted, I would be asked to make two trips to campus to participate in events- one in the fall and one in the spring...and yes, I would be asked to speak- on the *Strategies for Success*. Although public speaking isn't something I have been asked to do very often, I thought this was something I really should do, and without too much hesitation I said, "YES!"

During the week of November 13th, the university was celebrating *Global Women's Entrepreneurship Week* with a week long Women's Leadership Conference. [I arrived on Thursday and was scheduled to speak promptly at 9:00 AM on Friday.](#)

I would just like to say that the university has grown quite a bit since I attended 30+ years ago. It was my first trip back in 15 years. The alumni building is now located in a part of campus that hadn't even existed when I was a coed. I had forgotten most of the names of the streets, not to mention the fact that they were mostly "one way". Driving in circles and searching for the building where the conference was being held, I stopped a few times and asked various students. When I asked them to direct me to the alumni building, they looked as flummoxed as I was... they thought about it for a few seconds and then just shrugged their shoulders in that most annoying *millennial* way. I told them not to worry, it was ok, the alumni office would find *them* soon enough.

I started speaking and as I gazed across the room, what I saw were not just 100 female faces, but 100 women who wanted me to succeed. Their energy was so open and supportive, and they seemed to be silently cheering me on. I could tell they wanted to be inspired as much as I wanted to inspire them. From that moment, I knew it was going to be a *good day*.

I ended my speech by listing 10 business strategies that have worked for me. They are strategies I feel are important to anyone in business whether they are a manufacturer of gourmet ice cream sandwiches, an owner of a franchise or another interior designer. These are strategies I have learned on my journey, and they have helped me to live and work in balance so I can enjoy the journey along the way.



Women's Leadership Conference

The last strategy on my list was **"Giving Back"**. At that point in my talk, I felt the crowd seemed receptive, so I quickly decided to tell them about something that happened to me a few years ago.

"Regarding *Giving Back*, I would like to elaborate on something that happened to me a few years ago.

My two sons attended Tulane University in New Orleans. It was one of my last trips to New Orleans before my younger son graduated. My husband and I were staying in a hotel on St Charles and I had a couple hours free before I needed to change for an event. I didn't have anything planned for the day, so I decided to take a stroll around the French Quarter for a couple hours. When you are in New Orleans, you never want to waste a second!



I started walking down St Charles Avenue deep in thought, probably waiting for that next creative idea to blast through, when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. What made me look thru traffic to the other side of the street, I will never know, but in a shop window there stood a mannequin with a dress so beautiful, I had to cross the street and take a closer look. The dress was actually a ball gown, strapless, very 1950's Dior with a full skirt to the floor. What was unusual about the gown wasn't so much the style of the gown, but the choice of fabric. It was constructed from a white cotton fabric with a print in cobalt blue. An elaborate dress constructed in a more casual fabric. I thought, "How chic!" I decided to walk into the store to get a closer look.

When I stepped inside the boutique, I couldn't help notice that it was a bit disheveled. The displays had recently been dismantled and moved in order to assemble a large walk in measuring machine. Ignoring the flurry around me, I started looking through the clothes that were hung on racks against the walls. A young African American woman, the owner of the shop, came up and started a conversation. She explained that the shop was a woman's emporium showcasing young New Orleans design talent. We chatted for a while and when she found out I was a designer visiting from New York City, she was interested to get my opinion on her merchandise. I explained to her I wasn't a clothing designer, but an interior designer. Becoming even more excited she asked me if I would give her advice on the location of one of the display tables.

One thing led to another and soon I started dismantling and moving the displays. Tabatha was busy dealing with the giant measuring machine so rather than interrupt, I just started doing "that designer thing"- moving furniture. I hoped she wouldn't mind my taking things into my own hands, after all, the store was really starting to look a lot better. Two hours later, I had totally rearranged her shop, had given her ideas for paint colors, set up the displays and taught her a few lessons on retail display learned from my early days at *Bloomingdale's*.

As I was arranging the last finishing touches, she came up to me and said, "I know you are from New York City and New Yorkers don't like to hug, but I would really like to hug you, is that ok?"

I asked her, "Whatever gave you that idea- besides I'm originally from Pennsylvania!" It was like a scene right out of *Gilmore Girls*.

On my way out the door she said, "You probably won't believe this, but on my way to work today, I was praying to my grandmother to help me succeed in this business. I was feeling down and really overwhelmed - things have been tough. Then you swooped in like a fairy godmother and here I am standing in an entirely new shop!" She looked up and said, "Thank you, Grandma!"

When I left the store, I have to tell you that I had a high that was indescribable. Not because her shop looked so much better (it really did), but because the years I spent honing my design skills all came together and in what was a flash to me, I was able to help someone who appreciated it to the bottom of her soul. My heart felt so full I thought it would burst. It was one of the purest forms of joy I have ever felt. I was able to really make a difference in someone's life and...

...it cost only 2 hours of my time!

Ending my speech, I added that to me, that is what giving back is all about- the feeling of joy that cannot be bought or earned. Whatever came to Tabatha from what I was able to do for her, I reaped a hundred fold.

I discovered that the real meaning of giving back *isn't giving back at all!*

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In gratitude,

President

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