

WESLEYAN

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Geovette WASHINGTON '89

SENIOR VICE CHANCELLOR
AND CHIEF LEGAL OFFICER AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

BY HELEN ANNE RICHARDS '80

It's tempting to describe Geovette Washington '89 using nothing but her resumé. After all, her professional accomplishments have been interesting, challenging, and at the highest levels of public service.

This summer, she was unanimously elected senior vice chancellor and chief legal officer at the University of Pittsburgh, where she will serve as an officer of the university and oversee the attorneys working on Pitt's behalf. Her appointment is not surprising in light of her previous employment. She moved to Pitt from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) at the White House where she served as general counsel and senior policy advisor.

Geovette said in a recent interview that in the first few weeks of working at OMB, she would simply stop and savor the experience. It was, after all, the White House. Some afternoons, she said, she would leave the building, stop, and take a look over her shoulder. Seeing the iconic façade never failed to give her a thrill.

"For a kid who grew up in a small town in Georgia," she said, "and then went to Wesleyan, which is small, working my way to the White House was an awe-inspiring thing that really kept me charged and motivated."

"It's also extremely stressful," she added. "I think you can't do it at the right speed for an extended period of time. It was hard, but it was a lot of fun."

Fortunately, Geovette responds well to challenges. Often during her White House days, she said she would realize that she was the only woman in the room during meetings, and often the only minority in the room. Was she intimidated? Certainly not. Geovette had prior experience sharing her legal opinions and even more experience taking part in high-level conversations.

During Al Gore's challenge of election results in 2000, Geovette was a member of the legal team advising the former vice president. The stakes of her legal work could not have been higher, but she said she felt prepared and comfortable in her role.

As tempting as it is to try to describe Geovette with snippets from her resumé, it's even more tempting to describe her using her educational credentials. She is a 1989 *summa cum laude* Wesleyan graduate and a 1992 graduate of Duke University School of Law. She also served on the board of trustees at Wesleyan.

Although Geovette performed well at Duke, it was quite different from her Wesleyan experience, and she thought seriously about dropping out of law school. She

credits Wesleyan Professor Emerita of History Marcile Taylor with convincing her to finish.

Geovette said, "I told Dr. Taylor, 'I don't like law school. I don't like my professors. I think I'm going to quit and go to grad school.'"

She remembers Dr. Taylor saying, "Miss Washington you will do no such thing. You will go back to school, and you will graduate."

As Dr. Taylor remembers it, law school was exactly where Geovette belonged. She wrote in a recent email, "I thought that law school provided the best training ground for an ambitious young woman intent upon professional success. A law degree would insure obtaining a desirable entry-level position not only in the legal field, but also in public service and/or business.

She continued, "The grueling, if often boring, study in and of itself fostered traits that were essential for such careers: self-discipline, self-confidence, critical thinking, problem solving, articulate communication and, at a deeper level, the necessity for a measure of introspection and ethical inquiry. Because Geovette arrived at Wesleyan already possessed of these same qualities to a degree astounding for one so young, law school seemed to be an ideal fit for her."

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Dr. Taylor’s counsel was effective. Geovette returned to law school and graduated ready for legal work and public service. She already had a location in mind – Washington, D.C.

Geovette fell in love with Washington while attending summer programs there during high school and working as an intern in Georgia Senator Sam Nunn’s office. She returned after law school and based her private practice and public service in the city. Until her move to Pittsburgh this summer, she made Washington her home. Nothing lasts forever, though, and she said she is looking forward to new challenges in a new job and a new city.

In fact, Geovette’s plans for her new job at Pitt might reveal more about her personality than the job descriptions on her resumé or the degrees she’s earned. She has three goals: serving the university community with solid legal advice, increasing the collaboration on her team, and mentoring students.

“One of the things I find most rewarding about being a lawyer is helping people solve problems,” she said. “I am really excited about the opportunity to be a part of this university and to help my many clients figure out how to solve their problems and how to manage risk.”

Her goals, however, reach beyond the legal work. She leads a team of lawyers and staff members she describes as very talented, and she takes their current needs and future growth into consideration in her plans to increase the collaboration in her office.

“I’m really excited about having the opportunity to help them [her team] figure out what challenges them every day,” she said, “And to discover how we can work together in ways that will make them more collaborative and make their jobs more enjoyable.”

Her boss, Chancellor Patrick D. Gallagher, is one reason she is so committed to acting as a mentor to her team members. She and the Chancellor worked together at the Commerce Department, and she is excited about working with him again. Geovette believes that good colleagues are central to a good work environment.

“I figured out I am happiest and most productive when I am working with people that I really like and respect, and who respect me,” she said. “Chancellor Gallagher has always been a joy to work with. He has listened when he needed to and pushed back when he needed to, but has been prepared for me to push back as well. I think that’s the making of a really good team.”

She doesn’t, however, take advice solely from her supervisor. She said, “I may be the boss, but I can always learn from the people around me. I always seek the advice of my colleagues because having input from people who come to the issue fresh is very important for making sure it’s the best work product.”

Geovette gives credit to her professional mentors, starting with Dr. Taylor at Wesleyan, for helping her grow as a person and a lawyer. She said her job opportunities have come from former colleagues who have offered her new challenges. Because of the influence of her mentors, she takes mentoring younger people, especially women, seriously and plans to continue mentoring her staff and students at Pitt.

“This new job gives me the opportunity to mentor young people,” she said. “They are at the beginning of figuring out their lives and what they want to do. Often they have no idea of what is possible, and it’s exciting for me to be able to help.”

That’s one reason she “loved” serving on Wesleyan’s board of trustees. “It gave me the opportunity to talk to young people and to share my experiences with them and help them get experiences that would help transform their lives,” she said.

Tracy Ward Tilley ’89, Geovette’s friend and former Wesleyan suitemate, said those attitudes and goals are vintage Geovette Washington. Tracy said that Geovette’s drive and determination came initially from her parents’ example, as did her desire to make a difference in the world. No matter how heavy her workload was, she always had time for others.

“She’s always had a giving nature and



confidence in herself,” Tracy said. “She knew she could get her work done, even during midterms or exams, so she was happy to help her friends if we needed her.”

She wasn’t a prankster, Tracy said, but she had a wonderful sense of humor. Dr. Taylor may have described her very well when she wrote, “I can still see her strolling into my office with that ready smile and oh-so-quick intelligence.”

Geovette has taken her natural abilities, her parents’ example, her foundation at Wesleyan and her mentors’ assistance to craft a career that many would envy. Through it all, she has remained humble, engaged, enthusiastic and a supporter of her alma mater.

She said, “Wesleyan created an environment in which I realized it wasn’t difficult to be a woman in a place of leadership.”

Now it’s time for her to share herself and her values with a new generation of students and young lawyers at the University of Pittsburgh.