UAlbany Weekend MBA Stories – Cathlene “Cat” Schwartzbeck
Campus President, Branford Hall Career Institute, Windsor, CT

Strolling confidently around campus in her hot pink heels with a splash of orange and yellow, new Campus President Cathlene “Cat” Schwartzbeck is known for her open door policy, passion for education, and yes, her shoe collection.

“I’m not a black or brown, flat shoes kind of girl,” she says with a smirk. “I think the students enjoy the fact they can always hear me coming.”

Above her desk hangs the card her mom and dad sent as she was considering whether or not to accept the position of Campus President at Branford Hall Career Institute in Windsor, Connecticut, a position she has held since September 2015. The card simply reads, “Believe in yourself and you can do unbelievable things.”

“They did not say, ‘you should do this’, or ‘you shouldn’t do that’,” Cat points out with affection. “My parents have always challenged, equipped, and encouraged me to be my best self. And,” she adds, “my mom has the uncanny ability to have a card show up on the exact day I need it.”

Growing up in Saratoga Springs, New York, Cathlene is the youngest of three behind her sister Patricia and their older brother Russ. The trio’s parents, Richard and Patricia Schwartzbeck, taught by example that hard work and dedication pay off and to never give up on your dreams.

“Our parents are two very hard working individuals, who never let anything hold them back,” Cat shares. “They both worked full-time jobs, owned a convenience store my grandmother ran, and have been married for more than 40 years.”

Believing education is key in everything people are able to do, Cat Schwartzbeck went to college to be an elementary school teacher. “I wanted to teach second grade,” she says. “I knew for certain that’s what I wanted to do because I loved being in the classroom, understood education opens minds, and I admired my mom, who was a third grade teacher and truly loved it.”

Graduating Magna Cum Laude from the State University of New York, College at Plattsburgh with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education/Literature, Cat was armed and ready to teach. “I don’t sit still
well and it was difficult not finding a job immediately upon graduation,” she admits. “I filled my days substitute teaching but had an itch to make a difference in students’ lives more than just one day at a time.”

Cat began working with a core of students a couple nights per week at Sylvan Learning in Albany, New York and enjoyed the consistency of seeing the same students week after week. Using her college experience to be an educator, her eyes were opened to the variety of opportunities to assistant students and families outside the structured classroom.

It was a poignant time of self-reflection. “I had some frustrating days because I wasn’t in my own classroom, where I thought I should be,” she relates. “Then, a key thing happened for me on my 45-minute commute to the tutoring center. I let go of my own concepts and realized I could be successful helping students reach their educational goals in a non-traditional sense. I got excited.”

Under the wing of her mentor, Catherine Hull, who ran the Capital Region Sylvan Learning franchise, Cat spent the next 10 years employed at Sylvan Learning, moving from Director of Education to Regional Educational Coordinator to Center Director. Her responsibilities were filled with managing educational plans for students, ensuring the quality of programs throughout several learning centers and facilitating growth across the region.

“Cathy Hull really took a chance on me to teach me the business side of things,” Cat explains. “She taught me that by sticking with my core values and love for education, I could grow and develop as a business professional while helping students achieve success.”

During her time at Sylvan, Cat spent a year working as a Training Manager at the Sylvan corporate offices in Baltimore, Maryland. Before the position was eliminated, Cat was able to see the evolution of the training model and teach others to run tutoring centers across the nation.

With her position in Baltimore eliminated, she moved back to upstate New York. “That was a turning point for me and I knew I needed to be able to market myself,” says Cat. “I returned to my core and without question, understood the best way to accomplish that was through education.” She decided to pursue her MBA.

Having taken some Masters in education classes when first working with Sylvan Learning, Cat understood how challenging it was to balance work and school. Scheduling and convenience played a huge role in choosing where she would earn her MBA.

Don Purdy, Director of the University of Albany Weekend MBA Program made it easy. “Don was much more responsive than anyone else I had reached out to,” she asserts. “He invested the time to find out about me and my goals, making sure the program was a good fit for me.”

power up

THE WEEKEND MBA PROGRAM
Attracted to the group learning environment of like-minded individuals, UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program made perfect sense for Cat. “I think the strongest aspect of the program is the cohort structure,” she suggests. “Everyone was intent on learning from the professors and each other.”

Having been in a wide variety of classroom settings, Cat wholly appreciated the student dialogue and interaction in UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program. “We grew comfortable with one another and weren’t afraid to respectfully challenge each other and our professors. Because of that, our learning was accelerated. Not only did we share an enriched classroom experience, we shared dinners together and learned about other’s families and life experiences.”

The curriculum offered a little bit of everything, not overly focusing on any one area, which was another big attraction for Cat. She wanted an in-depth overview into all aspects of business so she could further her professional goals and that’s exactly what she received.

Cat considers joining UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program as one of the best decisions she’s ever made. She remains close friends with many from her cohort sharing, “It was a condensed, great way to build a network and lasting friendships. I gained so much more than I thought I would from getting a business degree.”

After earning her MBA in 2011 and receiving the 2011 Graduate Academic Achievement Award from the Weekend MBA Program, Cat was equipped to enter the post-secondary world in which she now lives. From 2012-2015, she served as College Director at ITT Technical Institute in Marlton, New Jersey, achieving Best Academic Department in the District in 2013 and 2014.

In September 2015, Cat Schwartzbeck moved her career back to her northern roots, accepting the role of Campus President at Branford Hall Career Institute in Windsor, Connecticut. Branford Hall helps students prepare for careers in medical assisting, health claims specialist, personal fitness training, paralegal, computer networking management, and massage therapy. Cat oversees the school, including enrollment, financial aid, academics, and career services.

“I'm proud to work with a dedicated team of faculty and staff who go above and beyond to help our students meet their goals,” imparts Cat. “I have a lot of family of friends here and everyone has embraced me with warmth. I feel like I’m home.”

With most of her belongings still in transit, Cat confesses it was hard to pick and choose which of her 75 pair of shoes she’d bring with her to kick-off her new adventure. Ironically, her love for shoes was birthed during her time at UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program.

“We were doing a group study about Zappos,” conveys Cat. “I found shoes I really liked but thought they were way too high for me. My friend Erin suggested I just order them and I did. It’s been a slippery slope ever since!”
Reflecting on her time with her cohort and UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program, Cat asserts one of her biggest takeaways is having the ability to communicate to her team why business decisions are made, whether it’s her decision or someone else’s.

“There is always a reason behind a decision and it’s not always evident,” she explains. “With the environment we live in, you can’t gain people’s trust and lead them to success if they don’t understand why they’re doing something. Being able to communicate coherently helps with buy-in, team building, and camaraderie.”

To professionals considering pursuit of their own MBA, Cat advises, “If you have the time and commitment, do it! If you can’t commit right now, wait till you are able because otherwise it can be heartbreaking to you and your classmates. When you are ready, I am living proof it can help you advance professionally and open more doors.”

In love with her brand new opportunity at Branford Hall, Cat says she’s the first to admit every day isn’t easy. On the particularly difficult days, she remembers the Eleanor Roosevelt quote from one of those perfectly timed cards her mom sent, stating, “A woman is like a tea bag – you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water.”

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Click here to learn more about UAlbany’s executive Weekend MBA Program.