UAlbany Weekend MBA Stories – Katherine Culbert, PE, MBA, PMP
Project Manager, Smith & Burgess

The fortune cookie she cracked open a dozen years ago held the fortune, ‘You have an ambitious nature’. “I keep it in my portfolio to remind me I’m not here for the status quo,” says Katherine Culbert. Far from status quo, Katherine is a licensed professional engineer, runs for the sheer enjoyment, is a certified Project Management Professional and a Six Sigma Green Belt through General Electric.

She has an aptitude for math and science but Katherine’s love for it comes from two influential high school teachers and her mother, who taught math in Schuylerville. During her sophomore year at Ballston Spa High School, Katherine lucked out and got Mrs. Julie Shepelavy as her chemistry teacher. “She knew what she was doing and was very passionate,” she remembers. “She had worked in the industry and taught us how things applied in the real world, not just what we needed to pass a test. She made chemistry fun. For example, on your birthday, she would write your name with rubbing alcohol on the blackboard and then light it!”

The following year, Katherine took physics with Mr. Richard Reed. “His class was so hands-on, I don’t remember ever taking a test,” she notes. “We did experiment after experiment and learned so much. He didn’t use calculators; he used a slide rule. It was a great experience.” You won’t be surprised to learn her senior year, Katherine took Advanced Placement (AP) Chemistry primarily because Mrs. Shepelavy was the teacher. “At that point, I just loved chemistry so much, I knew it’s where I wanted to build my career.”

Katherine attended The State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), a specialized, doctoral-granting institution based in Syracuse. “I was fortunate to study paper science because at the time, there were only 14 programs in the United States that offered that major. Because the school is merit based and I maintained the necessary GPA, my education was paid in full.”

With roughly a hundred people in the ESF freshman class, students were granted access to both the ESF campus and Syracuse University campus. “I had the best of both worlds,” Katherine explains. “I had small intimate classes and also experienced big school stuff, like being part of a great marching band and the National Honorary Band Sorority, Tau Beta Sigma.” Katherine graduated from ESF in 1997 with a Bachelor of Science in Paper Science and Engineering.

Before she landed her first professional engineering job, Katherine taught high school chemistry and physics in Voorheesville. “Mrs. Shepelavy and Mr. Reed gave me all sorts of tests, quizzes and experiments to use with my students,” she tells. “They were so supportive and I am forever grateful to them for showing me the fun, intriguing
side of science. I’m happy to say I’m Facebook friends with both of them and we still keep in touch after all these years.” (Editor’s Note: Mrs. Shepelavy recently passed away after a short battle with cancer.)

In 2002, Katherine had been working as a consultant at a large engineering firm for a couple of years. “One day, I felt an overwhelming sense of boredom,” she shares. “I started looking at grad programs and was very impressed with the University at Albany Weekend MBA Program. When I got an email response from them saying, ‘We start next week. Want to join us?’ I said, ‘Sure!’ and jumped in.”

The greatest value Katherine gained through her two years in the Weekend MBA Program was from the cohort structure and learning how to give presentations. “Now, I can use a microphone and talk in front of people without missing a beat,” she marvels. “Before achieving my MBA, I was terrified and needed to have everything written out on cards, including cues like, ‘look up’ and ‘smile’.”

Katherine credits then Vice Dean for Administration Linda Krzykowski for so aptly teaching presentation skills and instilling public speaking confidence. “She gave practical feedback so I always knew how to get better,” she relates, adding the two years of getting up in front of class every week helped, too. “I was recently at a safety conference, addressing a group of oilfield guys and as I was giving the presentation, I found myself thinking what Linda taught me.”

Upon earning her MBA in 2004, Katherine worked with several consulting firms, primarily on site and through General Electric. “I really cut my teeth on project engineering and project management, working on a lot of capital investment projects; everything from reinstalling a railroad spur to designing an entirely new chemical process. I got to do a little bit of everything.”

About eight years later, Katherine again faced the itch of boredom, longing to do something different; something outside the realm of engineering. She served as Executive Director of the National Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs before returning to her first love.

Since valves are her engineering specialty, Katherine jumped at the chance to work at Tyco Flow Control, now Pentair Valves and Controls. “I started as Northeast Regional Manager and was traveling constantly. Once, my sister called to ask what state I was in and I wasn’t sure,” she expresses with a chuckle. “I had so much fun and learned a lot about the sales process and how to position a product.”

Promoted within the company, Katherine moved to Boston, where she managed a multi-disciplinary team of engineers. “It was a whole different breed. The biggest project I worked on is just wrapping up now; a $10MM project which included the redesign of pressure relief valves and check valves to support the new U.S. Navy Ford Class aircraft carrier.”

Just as the relief valves she knows so well are designed to relieve pressure, Katherine recognized the need to blow off some professional steam and spend time with her second love. “I became a physics teacher for high school seniors in Boston,” she continues. “As an engineer, it was rewarding to work with these kids and see some of the light bulb moments when they understood some crazy physics issue in which they originally had no interest.”

From there, she moved to Spain for a stint teaching English to 7th, 8th, and 9th graders before returning to the states and to engineering. “I’ve had the opportunity to work with a couple of great consulting firms in the Houston area,
utilizing my project management skills and experience,” says Katherine. “Houston has become my playground. It’s the fourth largest city in the country and I love running through downtown on the weekends without having to stop for a single car because there’s no traffic.”

Katherine is continuing to enjoy her Houston runs as she settles into her new job as Project Manager with Smith & Burgess, an industry-leading Process Safety Management (PSM) provider. “I am thrilled to finally be able to truly utilize my MBA,” she exclaims. “The most appealing opportunity here is working on the business strategy of the company and helping set future direction.”

“I highly recommend the UAlbany Weekend MBA Program to professionals looking to gain a big picture perspective of business,” notes Katherine. “The faculty is amazing and truly top notch. The cohort structure helps you develop networks and still make friends through shared experiences. It’s also great that it’s affordable.”

If she were one for regrets, she’d regret the international trip was not yet built into the Weekend program. Students now have the opportunity to learn first-hand from international business leaders and enjoy an amazing networking and bonding experience. “I love the international aspect and am jealous it wasn’t part of the program when I was,” Katherine admits. “We live in a global society where we need to understand other cultures and integrate that understanding into business strategy.”

Peter Drucker says, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” It’s nice to know Katherine Culbert has successfully and rightfully moved from management into leadership.

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