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## Connecting and Cultivating Columbia: Vignettes of Columbia's Most Connected Leaders

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South Carolina Honors College  
Thesis Project

Connecting and Cultivating Columbia:  
Vignettes of Columbia's Most Connected Leaders

Allison Held

## Introduction

“Every person you meet knows something you don’t. Learn from them”. These words reverberate constantly through my brain after hearing them for the first time last year on my grandfather’s voicemail.

“This is Otto Budig. I’m not available right now, but I would appreciate it if you would leave your name and your phone number. While you're waiting for the tone, however, think about this: Every person you meet knows something you don’t. Learn from them.”

My grandpa changes his voicemail each month to include a different inspirational quote before the beep. Sometimes he finds it in a book or an article, other times it’s a tried and true axiom. This particular quote came from H. Jackson Brown, the author of the New York Times Best Seller “Life’s Little Instruction Book”. No matter its origin, my grandpa’s weekly rotating voicemail quotes are just a small example of the wisdom that emanates from this man on a daily basis.

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Otto M. Budig Jr. was born in Covington, Kentucky on November 1, 1933. When Otto’s father was in his fifties, he started “Budig Trucking Company”, a company that moved freight for conventions. Growing up, Otto and his brother, George, moved boxes and pushed dollies.

“It taught me a lot about the value of money and the value of hard work”, he recalls.

Otto credits his strong family upbringing with many of his personal convictions today. His mother was a pianist who had a graduate degree from the University of Cincinnati, and his father was an incredibly hardworking businessman.

Otto received his post-secondary degree at the University of Cincinnati and majored in accounting, where he learned “I never really wanted to be an accountant”. At the University of Cincinnati, Otto served as class president for the sophomore, junior, and senior classes. Most importantly, however, he met my grandmother, Sally Ferguson Budig. Sally, or “Gabby” as she is affectionately known to myself and her other grandchildren, serves as the exemplification of kindness and grace. She is undoubtedly the perfect complement and the perfect partner to my grandpa.

While at UC, Otto acted on a proclivity for flying that came from a close friend who had a plane during his childhood. Something inside of my grandpa said “I am pilot”, so he joined the Air Force

ROTC where he spent the next 5 years of his college career. He passed through to pilot training and flew a B-47 for the Strategic Air Command.

After his time in the Air Force, Otto returned to the family business. His father gave Otto and his brother George the opportunity to expand Budig Trucking Company into new avenues of interest, specifically transportation and convention decorating. When the trucking industry was de-regulated, the company was faced with an inability to compete with network carriers, and was losing money.

Consequently, Otto made the decision to sell the company's line-hull activity, but continued to work for the railroads loading trailers onto and off of railroad flat cars. The company, now called 'Parsec Inc.' found success in this market. Today, Parsec, Inc. operates over 35 facilities in the United States and Canada and handles approximately 60 percent of intermodaled units.

Otto's success as a businessman allowed him to develop relationships with movers and shakers in Cincinnati. In 1991, Otto was asked to sponsor a play in one of Cincinnati's local play series, Playhouse in the Park, for \$20,000. When approached about the sponsorship, Otto was taken aback by the grandiosity of the ask but chose to sponsor the play nonetheless. With a desire to learn and grow to be able to fully contribute to the organization, he held a seat on the Board of Playhouse in the Park. And he hasn't looked back since.

The Otto M. Budig Family Foundation was established in 1994 to honor Otto's late father and supports not-for-profit organizations, primarily those related to arts and culture, in Cincinnati. Otto has also served on and chaired numerous boards, including the Cincinnati Ballet, the Cincinnati Zoo, the Cincinnati Parks Board, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Museum Center, and Cincinnati Recreation Commission.

Well dressed in a suit and tie every day, Otto still serves as the President of Parsec, Inc. In his modest office in Queensgate, Ohio, he has organized stacks of papers dedicated to each of his present projects. My grandfather doesn't get involved with organizations to cut a check. He identifies needs in the community that align with his passion for the arts and his skill set as a businessman to offer insight. Each project he involves himself with requires his time and his dedication and frankly, he wouldn't have it any other way.

My grandpa is a business owner and a hard worker. He is a philanthropist and a lover of the arts. He is a reader, a lifelong learner, a giver. He is a role model and inspiration that I look to emulate both in action and intention.

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I aim to one day serve as a contributor to my community in an impactful way. From a young age, the necessity of giving back to a community that has given me so much has been tangentially instilled in me through the example of my grandpa, grandma and parents. In college, I became intensely involved with USC Dance Marathon, where my passion for philanthropy was ignited in a professional setting for the first time. Working with community partners and eventually interning with Palmetto Health Foundation furthered this inclination for nonprofit work and giving. Reflecting on the influence my grandfather has had on myself and on the community, I recognized that these influencers exist everywhere. Every community has a network of givers and “do-ers”.

I carried with me the mantra “Every person you meet knows something you don’t. Learn from them” from my grandpa, and I set out to learn about different civic and community leaders in Columbia. My aim with this endeavor was simple: I wanted to learn about other people. The most special thing I have found about people is that the amalgamation of their life experiences has an immense impact on their character and future decisions. In hindsight and with careful examination and retrospection, these connections become more clearly defined.

Throughout this paper, you will meet five different leaders in the Columbia community. Each vignette is the manifestation of secondary research and an in person interview with each individual. It will become increasingly apparent that each one has a different story, a different path that led him or her to the often-unintended position of community influencer. However, you will also see threads of similarities, parallels in character and values, and the crossing of paths.

Interviewees:

Samuel Tenenbaum is the President of the Palmetto Health Foundation.

Joan Gabel is the Provost of the University of South Carolina.

Mac Bennett is the President & CEO of United Way of the Midlands.

Craig Currey is the President of Transitions, a homeless shelter.

Mike Brenan is the South Carolina Regional President of BB&T

Joan Gabel  
Provost  
University of South Carolina

I met Joan Gabel at Drip, a local coffee shop, at 10am on a rainy Saturday morning. I reached out to Joan because she had recently spoken at a University Ambassador meeting, a student organization where my roommate is a member.

“Provost Gabel is the best. She is a really accomplished, down to earth, cool person,” my roommate exclaimed enthusiastically as I was creating a list of potential interviewees for this project. She couldn’t have been more right. Provost Gabel is cool. She walked into Drip, fresh off of her morning work out. She ordered a gluten-free muffin and a large latte and sat down to talk to me as if we’ve known each other for years.

I was pleasantly surprised that Provost Gabel made time to meet with me in the first place. Only a few hours after contacting her to try and set up an interview, she responded with “ I can see you this Saturday at 10am? Drip in 5 Points?” As the provost of the University of South Carolina, I can only imagine the calendar that she balances. But nonetheless, my inquiry was met with her uninhibited willingness to help me with my project.

Provost Gabel was born in New York City, but moved often as a child because her father worked for the Federal Government. She, along with a brother and two sisters, settled in Atlanta. She most often remembers her father working, and her mother as a stay at home mom for the first phase of her life. Attending middle school and high school in Atlanta, she recalls her childhood as being fairly typical.

Joan attended a small school, Haveford College, for post-secondary education. While she initially chose the school because of its academic reputation, she received much more than an academically rigorous education. Haveford College is affiliated with the Quakers, and being exposed to the Quaker lifestyle had a large impact on Joan’s personal values.

“Their ideals on how you treat each other, and how you trust each other and how that makes everyone better, that influenced me a lot”.

Another large influence on Joan’s desire to help others is rooted in her family. Joan’s brother has special needs. She recalls her mother as being “devastated by the discovery that my brother had special needs and frustrated with her inability to help him.” In an effort to positively impact others based on her personal experience, Joan’s mother went back to graduate school to become a speech pathologist and

work with children with cognitive and developmental delays. ‘That really seemed to strike the three girls, my two sisters and me’, she said of her mother’s desire to gain knowledge and experience to help others. Joan’s oldest sister now travels around the world, and is currently preparing to travel to Greece to help Syrian Refugees, and her other sister is a therapist with her own practice.

Joan’s desire to engage with other people and help the community was instilled at a young age, but her path to acting on this inclination was more of a “right place at the right time” career-direction change. After graduating from Haverford College, Joan returned to a job in Atlanta. She graduated from the University of Georgia Law School after getting married and practiced law in Atlanta for a few years.

During her time at UGA Law, Joan had a mentor, a professor in UGA’s business school, who coached a competitive team she was on at the time. The two were relatively close in age as Joan went to law school a few years after receiving her undergraduate degree. One day in conversation with her mentor turned friend Joan felt as though some sort of shift in her path might have been necessary.

“I had called him and said, ‘I like practicing law and I feel like I’m good at it. But I have this baby that I never see, and I look at the people who have achieved what I’m supposed to want, and I’m not so sure that they have the kind of happiness that would mean something to me. I’m working 16 hours a day and I don’t know that I like my life right now’.”

This was met with her colleague telling Joan about an opening at Georgia State (located in Atlanta) for a lawyer in their business school to do research. “When I switched from practicing law to academia, it felt like I’d won the lottery, I still do... it (the transition) felt very faded”.

Joan went from being on the fast track in her law firm to the fact track in academia. She worked at Georgia State for almost 12 years and rose through the ranks from junior faculty to Interim Administrator. Then she was recruited to Florida State serve as a department chair and ran the international branch of the business school. Joan’s next step was serving as the Dean of the Business School at Missouri for five years, and finally to her current position as Provost at the University of South Carolina.

Joan attributes her career transition to having an acute-sense of self-awareness in what she calls cultural alignment: knowing what she enjoys and what she’s good at. “In my own career trajectory, it would appear that I’ve been very strategic because my moves have been very aligned. When in fact, the grand plan wasn’t really there. But in the moments where I was making fork in road decisions, [cultural alignment] was always in the inventory of pros or musts, and I think that’s remained with me throughout my career.

With a career in academia, Joan has a unique ability to have a widespread impact on universities and students, something she loves. One of Provost Gabel's convictions as provost is a commitment to Service Learning. "My amount of time where I can actually do something like be a at food bank, I've never been able to find a way to carve out the time. So I had this realization along the way, somewhat influenced by my own children who did a lot of their volunteerism through school organizations to try and make it a part of my professional life."

Provost Gabel describes her role as one that stays somewhat in the background. She looks to make slight changes in processes for efficiency and harness Carolina's signature programs. "If I do it right," she says, "You won't even know what I did." She sees a great strength of hers in metrics, in setting goals and evaluating their success. In terms of Service Learning, Provost Gabel looks forward to finding avenues for students to utilize the 60% of the day where they are outside the classroom, ideally to do a significant amount of learning through external organizations while simultaneously benefitting the community.

"I really like being able to be involved with students," she remarks. "I really like being a multiplier for them and their experiences". She sees her position as one that asks her to be a positive influence, to show commitment to the university, to act as a model and to show up. "I'm doing what I can. And I think that's what everyone else should do, too".

Provost Gabel's influence has extended beyond her professional life into her personal one, but the influence is a two-way street. She raves about her children and their successes. "I don't think we ever really sat them down and said 'this is how you behave' about much of anything really," she says when asked if service is something she worked to instill in them. "I have to assume it must be some sort of implicit part of our family culture." Her daughter, a junior at the University of Missouri, rose through the ranks to become the Director of Missouri's on-campus food bank and leads alternate breaks for the school. Her eldest son is active in volunteerism through his faith and his church. Her youngest son, only 14 "is the first person to help out" in any given situation.

Throughout our conversation, it became exceedingly apparent that Provost Gabel holds her head high. She is happy with her life and proud of her accomplishments, but with an element of humility that is extremely admirable. When I asked Provost Gabel about her secret to success, her response showed wisdom, clarity and remarkable self-awareness.

"I think one of the biggest gifts you can give yourself is the idea that success is a customized word. Being successful is not a standard definition. The happiest people have good friends and feel like

they have a 3-dimensional life, but they did it their way. They have people to their left and to their right who they trust and believe in and who believe in them.”

Has Provost Gabel found success? “I’m still married to the same guy and my children are all almost adults, and they’re cool people. So I feel like all the important things in life I’ve done well.”

Samuel Tenenbaum  
President  
Palmetto Health Foundation

One of my first meaningful interactions with Sam Tenenbaum took place on March 21, 2015. As the Finance Director for University of South Carolina Dance Marathon, I was responsible for the oversight of a fundraising endeavor to raise \$500,000 for Palmetto Health Children's Hospital. That role and goal warranted a visit from the President of the Palmetto Health Foundation on the day that our fundraising total was to be revealed. As I sat at my computer running numbers and updating excel sheets at 10 o'clock that night (our total reveal was at midnight), Mr. Tenenbaum walked into the finance room, dressed in a suit and tie on a Saturday night, leaned over my shoulder to grab a peak at my computer, and said, "How we looking?" At that point, we were looking okay. By midnight, we revealed a total of \$501,528 fundraised for the hospital and were looking great, despite the happy-ugly-crying faces that covered the room. In those final moments, I have never seen a man more confident in our organization and me, as he looked me in the eye and said, "We got this".

Through my experience with Dance Marathon, I had the privilege of interning under Sam at Palmetto Health Foundation, where I really got to know him. Sam is an ideas man. He is a thinker, he is a learner, and he is a doer. Not a day went by during my internship at the Foundation that Sam didn't come into a meeting or an office with a new idea. While his ideas sometimes seemed far-fetched, they always sparked discussion about the decisions we were making, why we were making them, and if they were going to propel the organization in the right direction.

"Part of it is your life experiences you have in your brain. You may not be conscious of everything and how the brain is processing it, but you expose yourself throughout your life, and all that collective memory is there. And Bingo! One day, you've got an idea. Ideas can make a difference." No one's brain works like Sam Tenenbaum. But his process works.

After 9/11, everyone wanted to send money to New York City. Sam's idea transcended simply fundraising. "Why don't we buy a fire engine for the City of New York? They had so many destroyed." Tenenbaum saw the fire chief and the governor shortly thereafter and floated the idea. "A week goes by, and nothing. Then one day I get a call from the Principle of White Knoll Middle School. And she wants to buy a fire truck for New York City!" A fire truck costs \$350,000. When all was said and done, they raised \$540,000 and bought a hook and ladder. Not only that, Sam flew a group of White Knoll Middle

School students, many of whom had never left the State of South Carolina, to New York City to present the check themselves.

“It was just an idea that the brain put together, and this is the way my brain works, don’t ask me how or why. You see the issues and you let your brain work on it and solutions come out. Does everyone like your solutions? Sometimes they do sometimes they don’t.”

Sam uses his ideas to help others and sees his family and his Jewish faith as extremely strong drivers of a personal commitment to helping others. Growing up, Sam’s father and two uncles all worked for Chatham Steel, the family-owned business. He credits that closeness with planting a seed in him to be well educated and hardworking. Owning a family business also meant that salesman would come into town and have dinner at the Tenenbaum house.

“Thinking about my father and mother, in the Jewish faith you remember the whole idea that you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. Everybody is a stranger; you don’t let anyone you meet be alone. So salesmen were in town and they ate dinner at our house. I grew up in that kind of environment. Where its instilled in you to have an obligation to take care of yourself, but you also have an obligation, a serious obligation, not a perfunctory one, to take care of others.”

Sam played football and basketball in High School before heading to Emory University for college. After briefly planning to attend medical school, Sam opted to get a degree in Liberal arts. “I just wanted to know everything. I took music courses, art courses, literature, history, political science, science, chemistry biology, all of those things.”

At Emory, Sam was especially attuned to what was going on in the world. He was a part of a bi-racial group in Savannah, Georgia in the late 1950s, and marched with Dr. King at the Atlanta University Complex. “With the background I come from, you're supposed to speak up, you're supposed to be involved.” After marching with Dr. King, Sam did what every college student would do; he called his father. And Sam’s father responded as any father would: “We didn’t send you to college to get killed!”. But in that conversation, in those moments, Sam was looking for a deeper-rooted validation.

“Now I talked to my father and I said, ‘the question is am I doing the right thing practicing our values?’ And there was pause and he said ‘yes’, and I said ‘thank you’, and that’s it.”

After Emory, Sam went to graduate school and got his Masters Degree in American Studies and returned to Savannah to work for the family business. The first few years of his work at Chatham Steel, Sam saw little community engagement. As he became more settled in the business, he slowly became

involved with community service. His first experiences with community involvement came out of the necessity to solve a problem within Chatham Steel.

“Trying to start a business, to hire 20 people I had to go through 200. Half the people couldn’t fill out a one-page application, and they said can I bring it back to you, and I said of course. They couldn’t read or write. It made me think, ‘what’s going on here in South Carolina? How do you solve it?’ You get involved.”

Tenenbaum got in touch with SCANA, who had a literacy bus and would bring it out to Chatham Steel between shifts. Tenenbaum gave his employees the opportunity to better themselves in education while working for him at Chatham Steel. And the wages he paid enabled his employees to send their children to school.

Seeing an education gap in South Carolina and caring enough to do something about it gave Tenenbaum an itch to get involved. He started working on political campaigns and advocated for candidates that prioritized literacy and education. “I didn’t plan it, but having the moral compass, and having my own business gave me more freedom to do things that I cared about.”

From that point, Tenenbaum gained notoriety in the community. “All these other organizations come to you. You have an interest, you help, you mobilize your people. Then obviously as you grow wiser from life’s experiences, you realize that you can’t do everything. So where do you put your time and money? You can put your money where you can’t put time, and you can help people where you can’t put money. So you have to start making decisions about where to be most effective. You’ve got to go through a process of identifying what causes you care about and what is important to the community.”

After selling Chatham Steel in 2002, Sam spent his time serving on countless boards in Columbia before being recruited to his current position at Palmetto Health Foundation. “They knew me, they saw me in the community and saw what I could do.” Sam never saw these roles for himself, but wakes up each day with a commitment to make the community better.

“You know, I didn’t plan any of this. You have young people say, ‘I’m going to be a doctor, I’m going to be a fireman when I grow up!’ I’m still thinking, when I grow up, what am I going to be? But in the meantime, I think things have worked out pretty well.”

Craig Currey  
President and CEO  
Transitions

As he gave me a guided tour around Transitions, Colonel Craig Currey was a man of the people. He said hellos and how are you to men and women relaxing in the garden at the 260-bed homeless facility. He graciously thanked the Palmetto Health Hospital staff of dietitians who were preparing to serve lunch. He conversed with his own staff, men and women who was mopping the floors, doing laundry, or working back in the offices.

He also had the astute eye of a man running a comprehensive and complicated operation. He pointed out that the line for lunch was forming early on this particular Thursday. That the men's shoe section was running low. That the staff must have been re-organizing the library because the books were out of order. That a certain number of beds in the barracks were turning over today and would be opening up this evening.

A man's actions speak to his character. Craig Currey's actions speak to his organization and his efficiency, to his compassion and his sympathy. Craig Currey is a wonderful exemplification of a leader, and I gathered this without even having to interview him.

When I began my interview with Colonel Currey, I knew very little about the organization. It had been recommended to me to interview this man because of his unconventional rise to community influence in Columbia, but different from other leaders, I knew very little about Colonel Currey or his position.

Transitions is a 260-bed facility dedicated to helping Columbia's homeless population move off of the streets towards permanent housing. The facility is open during the day and night, housing approximately 70 men and women during the day in addition to the 260 barracks that are at capacity almost every night. Transitions partners with over 40 organizations in the Columbia area that come in to teach employability training, host personal development seminars, perform health services and work with men and women who have addiction or mental health problems.

Men and women can enter the Program at Transitions, which will provide services for 30 to 180 days in a structured program of recovery. Transitions also provides a long-term opportunity for individuals to address their personal obstacles over a two-year period. During this time, they are expected to obtain and maintain some source of income in preparation to transition to permanent housing.

“We want to break the cycle of homelessness and get people into their own place where they can be productive members of society. It’s good for them. It’s good for the neighborhood. It’s good for society. It’s good for businesses. It’s good for everybody.”

Craig Currey never saw himself running a homeless facility. “10 years ago, if someone had said, ‘you’re going to go and run a homeless center,’ I’d be like what? It wouldn’t have been what I would have guessed. Nonprofit work wouldn’t have surprised me that much, but not a homeless center.”

Craig Currey is a military man. He joined the army three days after he turned eighteen. Influenced by his father, who also served in the military, Colonel Currey was commissioned out of West Point, serving 34 years, 30 of which were commissioned. He was an infantry officer; he served in different tactical units, predominantly larger infantry and ranger units. As he became more senior, Colonel Currey served in Washington, DC, and ended up in basic training as a Lieutenant Colonel. Colonel Currey jokes that he never planned to end up in South Carolina. He came to Columbia for the first time when he was a Major at Fort Bragg. He and his wife went to the zoo, and then came to visit Fort Jackson. “My wife said, ‘why don’t we look at the housing’, and in typical put your foot in your mouth situation, I said ‘we don’t have to do that, we’ll never be assigned here!’ Of course I ended up being assigned here for 10 years. We still laugh about that, because of course I was wrong big time.”

His work as the Deputy Commander on Fort Jackson put Currey in the company of community leaders. He knew them and they knew him, which led him to become involved in Transitions.

“People knew me and they said hey we’ve got this place, we need you to come run it. And I said okay. So the people I knew who were board members knew me and they came looking for me. And at that time I didn’t have a job either... It’s worked out well.”

Currey joined Transitions in its infancy. The facility had been open for less than eight months. Today, it has been open for almost five years. When Currey came to Transitions, they were still trying to figure out a lot of organizational processes. But he quickly found parallels between the military and Transitions.

“My path in the social work world is nonexistent, but in the military world its very existent, and a lot of the things are very similar in terms of running an organization. The unique thing about basic training is you teach people basic skills. The thing about a homeless center is you teach people basic skills. You teach people how to live with other people. How to behave in a dorm. How to not go ballistic because you can’t have your way about everything. And of course you have clinics. I did these assignments at Fort Jackson and I’m doing a variation of it here.”

Many of the processes implemented at Transitions can be credited to Colonel Currey. For example, when he arrived, there was no accountant, all accounting was being done by the United Way. Now, Transitions does its accounting in house. Currey also prides himself on focusing on high bed utilization. When he arrived, there was a major dorm facility that was empty. At the time, they intended to use the space to build something that was not going to be logistically or financially feasible. Currey's realistic and outside perspective allowed him to say, "Let's do something and get people off the streets and into beds at night."

One of the most valuable contributions Currey has made to Transitions is the organization's community relations practices, something that transferred from the military. At its inception, Transitions was the enemy. "People sued to not have us here. It was hostile. And some of the early board members lived through that. When I arrived, people were sensitive. They didn't want to keep doing it because there were arguments, there was yelling." Partners are essential to the viability and success of the organization for collaboration, programming, and funding, so Currey has made it a priority to steward neighbors and other community organizations. "This is a team sport, and I think people are starting to realize it's helped the neighborhoods, that we're making a difference."

Colonel Currey is straightforward, direct and transparent in his life experiences. He never foresaw himself acting as the President of a homeless shelter. But the compassion that emanated from Mr. Currey as he spoke about the people that he serves is unparalleled. "The need is real. Homeless people, these are human beings, they don't have enough to eat they don't have a place to sleep, they're not getting medical attention, and people are worried because they're walking around on the streets at night. It helps when you have a place for people to go." Currey is proud of the success Transitions has found in such a short time. When individuals complete their program, they call it graduation. This is the first "graduation" many of them have ever had.

"When they graduate from here, it means they're moving out to their own place, generally with a job. Now they've saved money and are doing the right thing and can go somewhere. And that's a great day. We've done that with 1,142 people. We're proud of that and the fact that a lot of others have been helped off the streets. There are thousands of others that have been moved in the right direction. This is a tough group to work with; you know it isn't easy. I wish I could tell you it was easy. But it's worth it."

Colonel Currey credits his upbringing and military career for pushing him to social service. "I saw my father serve his country and his community. The army is the wrong place to get rich. And it's hard. You earn your money. So I think there was a definite public service aspect. I wouldn't really know

how to sit around and make money for myself to be honest with you, and that wouldn't motivate me a lot. It's a different sort of thing, doing this job in this place. It's different. But it's a good kind of different. It's rewarding."

Mac Bennett  
President & CEO  
United Way of the Midlands

Mac Bennett is a connector. A connector of people, of ideas, of communities, of experiences. As soon as I began my conversation with him, I knew Mac was a well respected leader in the community who understood the power of strategic collaboration.

Mac was born in the small town of Cheraw, South Carolina. His grandfather served as the mayor for over a dozen years, and his family was in the retail business. The bad thing about living in a small town? “Everybody knew each other. If you did something wrong, your parents knew about it before you got home.” The good thing about living in a small town? “Everybody knew each other. And people helped each other. It wasn’t organized, but it was the things that people did. Whether it was through the church, through people you knew through employment or that worked for us. You took care of people. If someone needed something, the community came around them.”

Mac attended college at the University of South Carolina, where he will admit he had fun. “I think kids today are a little more intentional than we were 35 years ago” he said as he reflected on his time at college. Mac was a Sigma Nu, which allowed him to develop a social circle, but saw personal growth and direction when he began an internship at the President’s office. His internship during junior and senior year transitioned into a career with the University. Mac served in several roles, including Ombudsman for President Holderman. He dealt with administrative and student issues, worked with legislative liaisons, and ensured communication flow. Mac also served as the first director of the Burns International Center, bringing international world figures to the campus, and Vice President of Administration. These positions allowed him to develop connections, harness delegation and logistical skills, and increase effective communication skills before departing after ten years of service to the University.

When Mac left the University, he saw a door open at the Community Foundation. “At the time, it felt really horrible,” Mac recounts. He went from a staff of 6,000 to being the only full-time employee, his wife had left her employment to raise their two children, and Mac took a big pay cut to assume the role. “But as I look back, it was the most perfect thing that could have happened to me... I’m one of those people that lets opportunity define. I have a strong faith, so if a door opened, I was willing to, not without planning and consideration, rely on the notion that if things happened in my life, there was a reason.”

From 1991 to 2005, Mac grew the Community Foundation from \$5 million to \$70 million in addition to grants and growing community engagement. While Mac's success at the Community Foundation was due somewhat in part to timing (the dot com boom led to increased giving as a tax break) much of the success can undoubtedly be attributed to Mac Bennett. In this role, Mac felt a heightened sense of personal responsibility. "Part of being in the nonprofit field is knowing that we don't own these jobs. It's not like working in the private sector. In this role, you're more of a steward or a keeper of people and the community's money."

Mac had the astute self-awareness to realize in 2004 that his skill set with the Community Foundation was reaching its expiration date. "I knew I needed to do something else, not only for my benefit, but the organization needed a different set of leadership skills."

By this point, Mac was well connected in the community and was approached to serve as the President & CEO of United Way of the Midlands. Mac took on the role and hasn't looked back since. His position with United Way has allowed Mac to do what he does best: connect. "I'm a people person, so I like interacting with people, and fortunately every job I've been in has enabled me to be a community connector and engager, and that's probably what I'm best at. I'm really a utilitarian"

Mac sees his position as one where he can identify the needs of the community and facilitate connections to address those needs. For example, when the flood hit Columbia in October of 2005, United Way of the Midlands and Mac Bennett jumped into action. ". I got a call from the mayor's office. The first call I made was to the guy who runs the Metro Baptist Association because I knew he had access to resources. The next call I made was to public transportation people, because I sit on their board and we needed to move people. It was interesting to see how that came together. You jump in and you make it happen."

United Way of the Midlands doesn't just deal in crisis situations, however. Some of Mac's greatest successes with the organization have come in addressing longstanding voids in the community. "We see a need and go out and do it. That's the hallmark of United Way. We can figure out how to get it done and what we've done is still viable and sustained." Recently, United Way has been involved in jumpstarting Transitions, a 260-bed homeless facility, continuing to built and run child development centers, and opening a dental clinic in collaboration with local hospitals.

United Way can't do everything, however, and Mac recognizes that. But his upbringing and faith have instilled in him the responsibility to do what he can. "You can't say 'I'm not going to do it because

I can't impact everybody'. You say, 'I'm going to do it because I can impact somebody'. Picking the right things is important, so you don't get so dissipated that you're not having an impact on anything."

Mac also finds fulfillment and personal satisfaction in his ability to foster growth in others so that they may realize their full potential. United Way of the Midlands hires students each year to offer an understanding of what non-profit work looks like as a career. He sees it again as his personal responsibility to find really talented people and help them become invested philanthropy.

He employs the same sentiment with employees and co-workers. "I know I succeed because, not so much what I do, but what people around me do. Having the right people around you and not being afraid to hire people that are smarter, that have skills that you admire but you don't have is important. My job is to hire good people and figure out where they fit best in the organization, whether they're a staff or a volunteer, then let them do their job. I really take great effort to make sure that people are able to flourish with their skills within the organization."

Mac's community-centered upbringing clearly influenced his character and the emphasis he places on collaboration and the power of connectivity. Mac's first instinct is to turn to those to his left and his right, who may have resources that he doesn't have, to work together and tackle problems that the community faces. Each day he thinks about "how do you come to work, how do you get up everyday and think about how you're going to use the resources you have to make life better for people that may not be in a great place right now."

At the end of the day, Mac chooses to use his skills and his connections to be a positive impact on the community. Influenced heavily by his upbringing and his faith, Mac has a strong sense of personal responsibility. "Our responsibility is to help other people. When questioned about who is your neighbor, it's the guy on the road I didn't know. That's true philanthropy, helping someone not expecting any return for that and not knowing who is getting the benefit of your effort. That's what gets me up every day. Am I doing that, and how can I do that better? How can I use the resources that are in my frame of reference to accomplish what needs to be accomplished in my community."

"I'm not here to leave a mark because that's important to me," he concludes. "I'm here to leave a mark because it's important."

Mike Brennan  
South Carolina Regional President  
BB&T

Mike Brennan loves to listen. “God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason. I take a lot of time to listen. Sometimes listening is hard, but it’s the best way to learn.”

My interview with Mike turned into more of a conversation than an interview. I shared with him my passions and influences as he shared his with me, and we learned about each other.

Mike grew up in Knightstown, Indiana, a small town whose claim to fame is that is served as the filming location for the movie “Hoosiers”. Mike’s upbringing drove him to be a hard worker. Living in a small town in Indiana fostered a mentality of being average, but an interaction with his 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher allowed Mike to escape that mindset. “On the first day of class, he put up on the board the word average. And he goes; I’m going to define average for you. Average is the best of the lousiest and the lousiest of the best. And that hit me right between the eyes. And I said I don’t want to be average. That was a real turning point for me.”

Another motivator for Mike growing up was his mother. “She told me early on, ‘Mike you can accomplish anything you want if you set your mind to it’, and that stuck with me.” Mike’s hardworking personality carried him through college. He attended the University of Tennessee for one year before transferring to finish his undergraduate degree at Bowling Green State University. Mike worked four jobs to put himself through college, and he was the first person in his family to graduate college.

After he graduated, Mike worked for Bank One. He became the President of Bank One at the age of 34, where he was “responsible for people a lot older and smarter than I was.” This experience was valuable in developing Mike’s skills as a leader.

“As a leader, don’t be afraid to admit that you aren’t as smart as the people around you,” Mike advised. “Because, quite frankly, you’ve got to surround yourself with bright people that know what they’re doing. If I knew everything they knew, I wouldn’t need them doing their jobs.”

In 1994, Mike left Bank One to run MainStreet Financial Corporation in Virginia, which was bought by BB&T in 1998. Since that point, Mike has served as the South Carolina State President of BB&T.

Mike’s entry into the world of community service in Columbia was inevitable. “It’s been in my DNA for as long as I can remember,” he says confidently of his desire to give back to the community. “I

think its something I've learned over time that to those who have been given much, much will be required.”

“That’s biblical. I want to say it’s Luke 12:28”. Mike gets up out of his chair to reference the Bible that lies open on his credenza. He was close, it was Luke 12:48: *From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

Mike’s faith and the personal responsibility he feels to give back have made him an incredibly effective leader and contributor to the Columbia community. He has served on countless boards including, United Way of the Midlands, Palmetto Health Foundation, the University of South Carolina Moore School of Business, and the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce. He currently serves as the Chair of the State Board of Education, serving at the pleasure of Governor Haley.

“My experiences have aligned in a way that I’ve grown to have a huge investment in improving public education.”

Continued education is paramount to Mike’s success as an individual and a leader. “I learned early on to have a growth mindset. You have to continue to grow and continue to learn. I’ll be 64 in May, and I’m still learning. As long as I’m learning, I’m going to keep working. When I stop learning, I’m going to hang my cleats up and go home. I’m a lifelong learner. I think that’s really key to being an impactful and effective leader.”

At the core, Mike cares about people. He cares to learn about them and use the influence he has accrued throughout the years to help them. The combination of Mike’s leadership abilities and life experiences, driven by his faith, have led him to be an incredibly well respected leader in Columbia and the 2012 United Way of the Midlands Humanitarian of the Year. Despite his success and recognition, Mike is still constantly committed to improving himself. “You’ve never really arrived,” he advises when asked about his success. “And those who think they’ve arrived, they haven’t.”

## Conclusion

The opportunity to learn about some of Columbia's most impactful community and philanthropic leaders proved to be immensely more valuable than I could have ever imagined. Through this project, I hoped to get an insider's perspective on the path to success and the ladder one would climb to be in a position to help others in the community. However, in practice, I quickly realized that there is no specific path. The only similarity between these leaders' stories is that highly personal factors drove them to success. And in that regard, they are all different and unique.

Craig Currey's position as CEO of Transitions stemmed from his military success. Samuel Tenenbaum's success is driven by ideas and a strong family upbringing centered around the Jewish faith. Mac Bennett saw the value of community togetherness growing up, and transitioned that into a position where he can act as a utilitarian, bringing community resources together. Joan Gabel drew inspiration from her mother and her children to enact a commitment to service learning in academia. Mike Brenan is driven by his faith and his upbringing, which fostered a personal responsibility to help others.

As different as their stories may be, each produced similar themes that developed each individual as an effective leader, a philanthropist and a strong person. First, it became increasingly apparent throughout the interviews that each individual has an inherent desire to help others. Whether this is rooted in upbringing, faith, or family, each individual was predestined to help the community.

Each leader also had a mentor, colleague or friend who recommended a path or connected them to their current community leadership positions. They rose to become well known community figures often through business, but others recognized their potential and they were consequently introduced into the world of community service.

Finally, each of these individuals values a commitment to continued learning. I left multiple interviews with packets of industry information, book recommendations, and inspirational figures designed to enhance business, personal and community development. Instead of touting personal achievements, each individual emphasized the importance of surrounding yourself with people that are smarter than you, that know things you don't, and can help you and your organization improve. They emphasized the importance of wanting to grow and a yearning to be better; they constantly resist complacency and learn from others. This attitude is something that resonated with me specifically as I had learned an immense amount from these individuals and they continue to learn from others. After all, "Every person you meet knows something you don't. Learn from them".