

Jared Jones

“The Importance of Being an Earner: The Janet Herring Mentorship Program”

When Janet Herring entered the work force in 1976, she was expecting a career of possibilities in accounting. However, as she later learned, she would have to continuously prove herself to receive the same recognition as her male counterparts.

A first-generation UAB college graduate, Herring broke ground by being the first woman to hold a managerial position at the Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank. Before retirement she served as the Vice President/Controller of the bank.

Herring, along with husband, Mark, has established the Janet Herring Accounting Student Professional Development Program through a generous donation to The Campaign for UAB. The endowed program encourages female students to succeed in the workplace through professional development workshops, job shadowing and mentoring.

Accounting, a male-dominated career, proved difficult for Herring to enter. Despite strides women have made in workforce equality, she recalls gender bias in the work place. “I remember there wasn’t even a women’s bathroom when I started out,” she says.

As Herring found out you couldn’t be too aggressive, otherwise you’d face the fear of being labeled “bossy.” But you couldn’t be a pushover. You had to ride that thin line of being firm yet kind.

She says its mandatory for women in the workforce to develop ‘soft skills’ — skills like interpersonal communication and leadership capabilities — to build relationships and connect with organizational culture.

Herring endured the challenge of establishing her role as superiority figure in a time when most women populated the entry-level secretarial and customer service positions. She had no female superiors to model her behavior after; instead, she was tasked with forging her own identity.

Classroom demographics have shifted in recent years as nearly 50% of graduating UAB accounting majors are women. Herring felt compelled to establish a mentoring program that encouraged graduates to pursue higher positions within a company once thought to be unavailable to women.

The mentorship program, led by UAB Collat School of Business Department of Accounting and Finance professors Eddie Nabors and Chen Song, is the first of its kind at UAB.

“It gives the students a chance to network and get real-world experience and ask questions while still in school,” Nabors says.

Each student in the program is connected one-on-one with a mentor. Song facilitates these matches, gauging the students’ personalities and pairs them with the mentor that best understands their interests and goals. “It’s almost like speed dating,” Song says with a laugh. The matches are revealed in October during a luncheon that kickstarts the program every semester.

The program began in 2014 with 18 students. Now in its second year that number has risen to 21.

Rebecca Champney, a senior accounting major, heard about the opportunity to join the program during a Beta Alpha Psi chapter meeting. Beta Alpha Psi, an international honor organization for accounting, finance and information systems students, started the mentorship program with the donation from the Herring family. Nabors serves as faculty advisor of the chapter.

“The program stood out to me,” Champney recalls. A non-traditional student, Champney left school after getting married. “I had no intention of going back,” she says. After her husband’s death, Champney was left with figuring out how to provide for her two children. She felt isolated, struggling to return to normality.

The program paired her with Crissy Carlisle, Chief Investor Relations Officer of HealthSouth. They connected instantly. Carlisle, a fellow mother, understood Champney’s concerns and reassured her that she wasn’t alone in her journey of balancing being a mother and an employee.

Champney gained confidence. She learned that her children are not a hindrance to her work performance; in fact, they helped solidify her soft skills of management and empathy. She will graduate in December 2015. She has accepted a job offer with Deloitte Tax and will begin in January 2016.

She believes the program is an incredible resource for female students to feel confident and comfortable entering the workforce.

However women are still facing prejudice. Herring recalls a story from a student who was left out of many of the organization plans during her time as an intern. “She said, ‘The whole office would go out for lunch, and while I was invited, it was obvious I wasn’t wanted. It felt like I was just invited because they felt they had to invite me, not because they wanted to,’” Herring says.

In a field where women have to put in greater effort to be seen as equal, it's crucial for women to have the skills to be seen as competent and qualified.

Dara Barker saw opportunity in the program. Barker, a UAB graduate student, is completing her master's degree in Accounting and currently serves as student president of Beta Alpha Psi.

She has been a part of the program for two years now. She was matched with Krystal Pino, Staff Accountant of Kassouf and Company for her first year. She is now paired with Crissy Carlisle for her final year at UAB.

"The program and working with my mentor taught me better communication skills. I learned how to tailor my questions in a professional manner," Barker says. She says the greatest asset she's gained from being in the program is knowledge. "No matter what happens, it's easier to be confident if you're knowledgeable and have information about your field."

Herring believes the program to be a small step in the right direction for female students. Herring hopes that students utilize this opportunity to network and grow through mentorship so they don't have to go through the tribulations she faced while rising in her job field.

"My personal goal," she says, "is to foster the confidence that [students] can learn that they have the power to go on and achieve."

To learn more about the Janet Herring Student Professional Development Program, please contact Eddie Nabors at eonabors@uab.edu or Chen Song at chsong@uab.edu.