

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dean Ruby Perry Reflects on Her Journey to Leadership

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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In a blog recently posted on this site¹, I described the five veterinary college deans who had graduated from Tuskegee University during the 1970s, and posed the question of what motivated such an impressive number to pursue positions in academic leadership.



Interim Dean Ruby Perry

(Photo provided courtesy of Tuskegee University)

*Ruby Perry DVM, MS, DACVR is Interim Dean of
Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health*

Interim Dean Ruby Perry (Tuskegee, 1977), a board-certified radiologist who spent her career at Tuskegee and Michigan State University, graciously allowed me to share her personal story. “I can’t tell it myself,” she told me, “because it’s too intensely personal, but perhaps you can tell it for me. It’s a story that should be told and perhaps it will help someone pursue a leadership position.”

Dean Perry acknowledged that many factors framed her personal and professional life. “My journey involved risks,” she said and acknowledged with much gratitude her mother’s admonition to seize the moment whenever it presented itself. “Because you are Black,” her mother told her when she was in high school, “and because you are growing up in rural

Mississippi in this civil rights era, you will only get an opportunity once. Don't let it pass you by." Dean Perry elaborated,

I grew up in the Deep South in the small Mississippi town called Tougaloo, right across the street from a historically Black college by the same name. The college served as the base for gatherings and meetings of civil rights leaders visiting my area. The local community, of which my mother was a prominent member, provided refuge and food for the leaders, and supported their plans and their strategies to advance desegregation.

Though still a young girl, Ruby witnessed her mother's passion and her unrelenting commitment to use the gifts and abilities that she had been given to help the cause. By her words and actions, Ruby's mother indirectly "charted my life" by pushing her to take a leap of faith to make a difference toward the common good.

As the middle child of five, Ruby felt "boxed-in," and that perhaps pushed her toward developing a spirit of independence. Though her siblings received the same opportunities for an education, Ruby's mother perceived that she was different. She was highly inquisitive by nature and she had a desire to explore the world and its opportunities. Ruby's mother encouraged her, putting her in a typing class that eventually helped her through college. Though Ruby would have preferred playing basketball like other children, "I got cut in the first round anyway," so my mother's decision turned out to be a fortuitous one.

The defining event in Ruby's teenage life was becoming one of the students chosen by her mother and other community leaders, in collaboration with local Civil Rights leaders, to officially desegregate the high school adjacent to the neighborhood where she lived. "I was pulled from my segregated high school in Jackson, Mississippi, to be one of five African American students to enter the 10th grade in an all-white high school."

Though the five students were unwelcome and had no social interaction with their white classmates, they all survived to graduation. There continued to be no association with the school whatsoever until 2009 when they were unexpectedly invited to their 40th class reunion. Two of the five had died and a third could not be located. Only Dr. Perry and one other former student attended what turned out to be an emotional conclusion to an untenable 40-year estrangement.

Many of my classmates remembered what we had endured and came up to us and apologized. The former school principal was even there and he made a special effort to meet with us to talk about those three years at his high school during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. He also expressed remorse for how we had been treated by him and by others on his watch. The choir director, who had refused to allow us to join the school choir when we were in high school, invited us to sing in the Class Reunion Choir. It was an extraordinary event.

Dr. Perry cited two other principal factors in her passion for leadership: mentors and friends. She ascribes to the notion that a circle of mentors is essential to an individual's growth and development. "I have many mentors who have not only motivated me, but provided guidance and afforded opportunities along my career journey." She feels fortunate to continue to have a mentorship circle of those who believe in her and encourage her to be the agent of change for which she has the capacity, desire and interest. She singled out for special gratitude the women veterinary deans whom she met at the recent deans' meeting in Naples and to whom she felt a special kinship during their van drive from Naples to Orlando. In another dimension, she talked about the African American veterinary deans whose willingness to share their experiences and keep in touch with her means so much.

Finally, Dean Perry recognizes the importance of true friends. "Though persons in this group are few," she acknowledges, "they are long-lasting supporters." In her development as a leader, friends who have helped her to improve her self-awareness by giving honest and direct feedback without being judgmental have been critical to her success.

During a workshop on Women's Leadership I co-presented last week at St. George's University in Grenada, I described Dean Perry's admonition to seize opportunities and not let them pass by. Sitting in the front row was a member of the faculty (Dr. Annie Corrigan) who almost leapt from her seat as the picture of Perry flashed on the screen. Without hesitation, she turned to the assembled students in the rows behind her and regaled them with how the former section chief of radiology at Michigan State University—Dr. Perry had spent 17 years at MSU—had mentored her during her most formative years as a junior member of the faculty.

After the workshop, a student from Barbados came up to me to let me know how grateful she was that we had included people of color in the presentation. Though there were several examples, I am reasonably certain that it was the image and story of Dean Ruby Perry that had the greatest impact on her.

Mentee and mentor, receiving and giving throughout her career, Dean Ruby Perry has been more wave than ripple in the ever-expanding circle of mentoring and leadership.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Five Tuskegee University Graduates from the 1970s Became Deans. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. February 2, 2015.

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Mentor
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TOPIC:

Mentors

LEADING QUESTION:

Why has Tuskegee produced so many leaders in veterinary medicine?

META-SUMMARY:

Dean Ruby Perry discusses how growing up in the Civil Rights Era shaped her passion for leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.