

Tom Gibson

The Shoes of Others

"Mr. Gibson," the overly large fellow, seated behind an overly large desk in an overly large room, addressed Tom. "I am the Dean of Admissions here at Duke University. A colleague of mine was to interview you today, but he has taken ill, so I will be taking his place. I have yet to read your transcript, but if you'll give me a moment, I'll review it now."

Tom watched silently as the Dean's eyes skimmed the printouts before him, noting his frequent glances of disapproval and unimpressed sighs. After a moment, the Dean put the papers down and said, "Mr. Gibson, your grades are less than impressive, so I have to ask, why exactly are you here?"

To this day, many years later, Tom cannot remember how he responded to the Dean, or what exactly ensued in their conversation. What he does know is that what should have been a perfunctory fifteen minute interview turned into a two-hour-long genuine discussion. At the end of those two hours, the Dean paused, looked across the table to Tom, and said, "Mr. Gibson, as the Dean of Admissions, I'm given a certain latitude to, on rare occasion, admit a student who may not obviously qualify to attend this prestigious institution. I would like to offer you that admission, but with one important caveat. At the end of your senior year here at Duke, you have to come see me again and tell me honestly that you are graduating with the highest of honors. In addition, you must demonstrate how you've contributed to the community of this university and made it a better place to be. Only then will you qualify to enable me to admit the next you. Therefore you must understand that this is not about you—this is about somebody in the future that you can help."

During the entirety of his time at Duke, Tom therefore walked not only in his own shoes, but also in the shoes of that next student, unknown

to Tom, who might find his or herself sitting across from the Dean, wishing someone would take a chance on their future. At the end of his Duke undergraduate career, Tom returned to the Dean's office, but before he could say a word, the Dean said, "Mr. Gibson, I already know." After listing the ways Tom had exceeded his expectations in terms of course selection, performance, and contribution to the community, he said, "Congratulations Mr. Gibson—you have earned the right for me to admit the next you."

"It was a defining moment,"

Tom says now. "It was unusual on his part; I challenged him to admit a student that, under classic criteria, shouldn't have been admitted, so he challenged me in return to be deeply mindful that my actions would have a profound impact on people I didn't and may never know." The Dean's lesson has stayed with Tom, such that he now makes positively impacting those around him—and challenging others to do the same—the core of his profession.

Tom is the founder and CEO of Coulter, the centerpiece of which is an Association Management Company that is retained and contracted by boards of directors of nonprofit organizations to serve as their headquarters, staff, and infrastructure. Coulter works with the broadest possible construct of the nonprofit sector, from trade and professional associations to educational, charitable, and philanthropic foundations. "What we really look for in a client is social purpose and high potential for impact," he explains. "They have to advance society and their specific community of interest in some evident way that we find valuable, while also having a business trajectory with growth potential that we can help activate. If we believe the organization can become more dominant within its space, and if we believe in its economic and social potential, we will become both a strategic and operational



partner with the organization in order to activate that potential.”

Since its inception in December of 1989, Coulter has grown to employ nearly one hundred professionals deployed in four distinct business units. Coulter Nonprofit Management unit is the core of the business. The second unit, Coulter Events, brings nonprofit stakeholders together through award shows, conventions, conferences, and trade shows to enhance knowledge exchange, celebrate success, and expand nonprofit economic capacity, while the third unit, Coulter Strategy and Innovation, houses Coulter’s public relations, public affairs, and web communications practice areas. It’s also the unit through which consulting services are delivered to an array of large staffed nonprofit organizations to help them refine their growth strategies. In addition, says Tom, “Coulter Strategy and Innovation also works with a number of global corporations, aligning them with best in market nonprofits to help accelerate their corporate objectives.”

The final and most recent addition to the Coulter enterprise is Agency Coulter, which is unique in that it is purely focused on corporate relationships, working with worldwide brands such as American Express and Chanel to conceive, develop, and deliver luxury experiential events. “It’s very different from the other three units, but we were fortunate enough to find a niche in high-end luxury event development,” he says. “That side of the business does well, which enables us to do more good on the nonprofit side. It’s a huge business lesson I’ve learned over the years which I try to pass on to my clients, that it’s a lot easier to do good if you’re doing well as a company.”

Tom credits his father, who started his own business selling small appliances, for influencing his entrepreneurial instincts. Shortly after Tom was born in Memphis, Tennessee, the family moved to Clearwater, Florida, where he and his three siblings grew up close enough to the beach for it to prove a worthy distraction from school and chores, but inland enough to have acres of orange and grapefruit groves, with a backyard pond full of alligators and snapping turtles. His mother helped his father’s business from time to time, but for the most part stayed home with the kids and volunteered heavily within the community.

Tom enjoyed spending most of his childhood days engaged with friends in sports,

even though he wasn’t as naturally gifted an athlete as his brothers. Tom relayed the story that when he was eleven, he was on the little league baseball team, where he was far from the star player. In an important game, however, he came to bat in the bottom of the last inning against the best team in the league. “Coming up to bat, I knew there was a collective groan from all the parents and grandparents in the stands,” Tom said. “We were trailing by two runs, with two men on and down to our final out. The crowd knew the game was about to end as so many had ended, with me striking out.”

Yet Tom was determined not to let his teammates down this time, so when the pitcher threw the ball, he closed his eyes and swung as hard as he could, hoping simply to make contact. Much to his surprise, he felt the ball connect with his bat—an experience so unfamiliar to him that, when he opened his eyes, he wasn’t sure what to do. His teammates shouted at him to run, so he took off towards first base, only to find the other team’s players were walking off the field.

“I realized suddenly that I’d hit a home run,” he smiles. “As I rounded third base, my teammates gathered at the home plate to welcome me, and it was just this grand, great feeling, that I knew I wanted to replicate, since I had never before enjoyed that type of success. I also realized that all the players who were always very nice to me but ambivalent about my place on the team were excited not just for the win, but for me. This notion of team, working with others to achieve a common goal—I only later realized how it all assimilated in the joy of that moment. I understood what it meant not just to succeed, but the importance of sharing in other team members’ successes in pursuit of a common goal.”

After that day, Tom’s love of teamwork naturally brought out an innate empathy for those around him. He had many friends as a kid, with one in particular that seemed especially grateful to come to his house after school, staying most nights for dinner. Tom wondered why he always came to his house but never invited him over. Finally, one day after school, the boy decided it was time for Tom to come over, so the pair walked to the road adjacent to the school with tattered-looking shacks lining the street. Once inside the boy’s house, Tom was horrified to see that his friend essentially lived by himself, with weeks-old dirty dishes in the sink, little furniture, and rats darting from under the

floorboards. "I understand now in my adult life that he was the single child of an alcoholic mother, but at the time, I could barely believe it. I was heartbroken for him," he says. "I could see that he wanted me to understand what he was dealing with, and our friendship grew strong from my seeing the incredible obstacles he faced."

His friend's experiences made Tom even more determined to better define and reach his own potential, while simultaneously helping others do the same. "While at that point I didn't have the first clue what I wanted to do in my adult life, I realized early that I wanted to do something that enabled others to find success, particularly those facing longer odds," he remembers.

Like many kids his age, Tom took his first job at age eleven after a little gentle nudging from his father. "My dad pulled me aside and told me that when I turned eighteen, I was on my own financially," he recalls. "My folks didn't make me get a job as a kid, but I realized early that if I planned to go to college, I had better start saving up." Tom took an after-school job working at a mobile home park, where his older brother worked. "The park employed a broad range of laborers, from those in their forties and fifties, to high school kids, or in my case, an eleven-year old," he laughs. "It was a great life experience, not just in terms of work ethic, but in how to get along with all different types of people."

While he worked throughout his middle and high school years to save up for college, Tom never felt particularly motivated by academic success, mostly because he was never really pushed by his parents in that regard. "I had two best friends in high school who were very smart, and I told them I thought I might want to be a psychiatrist one day, since I really liked the notion of talking to people and helping them find their potential," he recalls. "I remember in eleventh grade, we had just gotten a test back on the circulatory system, for which I, of course, had not cracked a book. My two friends were both dissatisfied with their grades, the first receiving a 98 percent and the second, a 96. When they asked for my grade, I told them the truth—that I had gotten a 7. They looked at me and said in unison that medical school and a career in psychiatry was not likely in my future."

Despite these minor setbacks, Tom landed his spot at Duke University, having displayed his wit and natural intelligence to the Dean of

Admissions, who in turn gave him the much-needed motivation to apply himself to his academics. "Once I realized someone was willing to take a risk on me, and being placed in an environment with very bright people, I wanted to be viewed as a peer and a contributor, and someone who measured up, so it was an immensely powerful motivator," he recalls.

During an internship in Washington D.C. between his junior and senior years, Tom received another defining moment in discovering his great affinity for politics. "I came to understand the politics of human motivation and behavior, as well as of process and procedure," he said. "I really 'got' the political realm, and I was inspired by how these intelligent people were putting their knowledge and talents to use. At that moment, people were coming to Washington to bring affirmative change and improve lives across the broad spectrum of the population, and I found those sentiments really aligning with my own."

Tom graduated from Duke in 1980 with high honors in Public Policy Studies and English, moving to Washington for a job with a consulting firm. On his first day of work, the company lost a large contract, which led to significant layoffs, so after only two hours on the job, he was called to the CEO's office. "I thought for sure he was going to offer me a raise," Tom laughs. "But the first thing the CEO asked me was my name, so I knew that was a bad sign. Right away, he told me I was fired, and I could hardly believe it. I had just signed a lease for a place on Capitol Hill the day before."

Tom was disappointed by the sudden turn of events but fortunately found a new and even better position quickly. Even with the brief turbulence in his new city, he fell in love with Washington and had a deep appreciation for people in public service. He lived across the street from a New York Senator, and from his bedroom window, Tom could see the Senator in his kitchen each evening after the Senate has adjourned, always sitting with Members of Congress of the opposing Party while sharing a bottle of Irish Whiskey, finding a way to move legislation. "That was the beauty of those days in the Senate. They were appropriately focused on getting things done," he says. "That's not to suggest they didn't have some kind of a political agenda, but their higher calling was to represent and serve the people, which is almost always done by finding

consensus and compromise. I saw it live and in action almost every night, and I really admired it.”

In 1984, Tom co-founded and served as a senior Association Executive for the Competitive Telecommunications Association (CompTel), a telecommunications industry trade association. As part of the organization’s growth trajectory, they had been exploring the acquisition of some related nonprofits, and Tom had been given permission by the Board to engage in confidential discussions with related organizations. Shortly after, the Board decided that while bringing the organizations under the company’s umbrella would increase revenue, it would dilute their effectiveness on Capital Hill, so they cancelled the acquisition discussions.

“I had brought all these nonprofit organizations to the table, so they weren’t very happy when I went back and told them the deal was off,” Tom recalls. “They wanted me to make this right for them, which made me realize I had an opportunity to create my own organization where these companies could access and utilize the joint services they needed to process and prosper. Essentially, I replicated the economic advantages of the proposed acquisition while still enabling the organizations to preserve their identity and unique voice in the marketplace. From there it grew to be framework for a broader array of nonprofits to enhance their economic trajectory and realize their potential as an organization.”

With this vision, the Association Management Bureau—later to become Coulter (Tom’s middle name)—was born, and as Tom was formulating the vision, he was convinced it was an original idea. “This was pre-internet, so all I had to go off of was flipping through the yellow pages,” he laughs. “I didn’t find anyone doing what I wanted to do with nonprofits, but as it turned out, there were probably about fifty similar organizations worldwide. Today, there are probably around 500 operating worldwide. Most fall between five and twenty five employees, so Coulter resides in the top 5 percent in terms of size. But more importantly, I believe Coulter is in the top 1 percent in terms of impact.”

While Coulter may not be the only of its kind, it stands out for its unique blend of units, as well as for Tom’s empathy as a leader. “I think that leadership must come from a deeply sincere place, especially in this line of work,” he says. “I find that the ability to put one’s self in someone

else’s shoes and view the world through their prism is powerful. It informs my decision making at work in how I deal with colleagues and negotiations, and at home in how I relate to my children and my wife. I always try to put myself in the shoes of the person with whom I’m speaking and to view the world through that person’s eyes.”

Tom’s wife, Suzanne, has been a particularly powerful influence in shaping his views because of her strength and unwavering sense of self. “She spent her formative years as the daughter of a man who would serve as a Governor and then a Senator, and it’s easy in that type of framework to lose your sense of self, since you’re often defined by people viewing you through that prism,” Tom explains. “But Suzanne possesses a fierce sense of who she really is, and I hugely admire that. She is exceedingly bright and grounded, and has an emotional IQ that is just off the charts. I can hardly believe my good fortune to have her as my life partner and mother to our triplet daughters.”

While Tom serves on an array of Boards and has received numerous honors and awards, including the coveted American Business Ethics Award, his strong preference is to stay in a position of low visibility so he can focus on his business and his family. “People know Coulter, but they really don’t know me, and that’s a personal choice I’ve made,” he says. “I jealously guard my privacy and my personal time with my family.”

Tom values his family time now more than ever as his triplets prepare to leave for three different colleges. “I’m extremely proud of their success so far and their ability to carve distinct paths for themselves,” he says. “I tell them the same thing I would tell any young adult entering the professional world, which is to take the time to find yourself and never let anyone define for you what constitutes success. I want them to discover their personal definition of success and strive toward that while enjoying the journey along the way.”

Tom and Suzanne also encourage their daughters to experience as much as possible so they can understand what resides at the core of what matters most to them. “I think experiences can be defining because they bring to the surface something that might reside deep within us,” he remarks. “Defining experiences are created by a constellation of moments—that’s the beauty of life.

You are born the way you are, and certain things about you are emphasized and brought to the surface over the course of your life. Whether it's a random home run, a two-hour chat with an admissions director, the good fortune of meeting a life partner who shares your views and values, or the birth of triplet daughters, my life represents a constellation of defining moments and experiences that brought my natural gifts to the surface, which has manifested in a thousand ways, and for which I am very grateful." Thanks to this constellation, Tom's legacy is defined by his ability to put himself in the shoes of others, and to work to make the lives of others better because of it.

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