Lunch With *D CEO*: Kathleen Gibson

The president and CEO of Southwestern Medical Foundation shares her path from banking to medical philanthropy.

BY MATT GOODMAN | PUBLISHED IN D CEO MARCH 2017 | ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTEN ULVE

How does a lifelong banker become the leader of the nonprofit, philanthropic partner to a world-renowned medical school? The answer emerged as Kathleen Gibson walked me through her trajectory as a longtime corporate banker turned president and CEO of Dallas' Southwestern Medical Foundation. It hinges upon a series of perfectly placed incidents in her life, and for some reason I realize this just as our waiter pours rich leek and potato broth over poached shrimp at Flora Street Café.

Begin with her formative years spent overseas, first as a toddler in Argentina and then for first and second grade in the Dominican Republic. There, her father instilled in young Kathleen how to approach seemingly overwhelming challenges with a forehead-slapping simplicity. For example: After the assassination of the brutal dictator Rafael Trujillo, the federal government tasked

Gibson's dad with leading an economic resurgence on the island. She later asked him how he began such a Herculean task: "He smiled and said, 'You take a census.'" How simple. The census showed a need for education among the islanders, so he oversaw the creation of an accredited American school there. It showed Gibson to never underestimate common sense in overcoming an obstacle.

Then there was that comment from a family member, which soured her on pursuing a career in medicine before she went off to college: "He said, 'I would never go to a female doctor.' I thought, maybe that's not the right dream?" Off she went to Texas A&M University, first trying politics, then law, and finally, banking ("what I was doing was a great deal of fun!"). Then there was the first job after college—a training position with the now-defunct

Republic Bank, which taught her that company culture was just as, or more, important than day-to-day operations. She spent seven years there until, improbably, the Dallas-based institution went under in 1988. "There used to be billboards in Dallas that said, 'Republic Bank Is Dallas," Gibson says. "It wasn't foreseen that we would have a real estate crisis that would take it down."

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The crash taught her to diversify her investments and to advocate the same for her clients. She rallied to find a job and wound up working for what became Bank of America for 25 years, before landing a position overseeing commercial lending for Citibank in six markets in Texas. Until 2012, that is, when a board she sat on decided to include her in succession plans for its leadership.

That's when Gibson took the reins at the Southwestern Medical Foundation, a standalone nonprofit that raises money and awareness for UT Southwestern Medical Center. The foundation helped raise more than $150 million for the William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital, for example, and now is raising money for the university's initiative to understand and treat brain disorders. The foundation has grown to have more than $800 million in assets, and UT Southwestern's success has followed. It has been home to six Nobel Prize recipients since 1985 and made such significant breakthroughs as identifying genetics as a factor in heart disease.

"How did all this happen? How did it lead to this tremendous leading quality of research that attracts this top, top talent?" Gibson asks, picking at her Caesar salad. "It's a commitment to innovation, it's a commitment to great talent that can take you there."

Just as her father did all those years ago, Gibson is putting her job in a plain perspective. And, besides, she says, her job at the foundation isn't as foreign as it seems. "I'm managing a portfolio with assets, I'm managing risk, we have real regulators, I'm managing people, I'm managing lots of funds from lots of relationships," she says. "It's the same thing that I have always done." Simple.