



POSITIVE THINKING
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY EVAN TEMCHIN
⌚ 10 MIN.

Stephen Standifird Keeps His Face to the **SUNSHINE**



Standifird masks up and greets students on their first day of classes. "It speaks volumes of the institution that we continue to drive forward in the midst of a pandemic."



You don't have to talk very long with Bradley's new president, Stephen Standifird, to realize he is a man rooted in optimism. Despite the ongoing challenges facing higher education — along with the COVID-19 pandemic — he is a firm believer in the power of human potential and thinks the university's best days are ahead.

"The term I've used throughout is, 'survive and then thrive,' but even as we navigate these current environments, we still need to be making investments," said Standifird. "And that's something that we've been really thoughtful about. How do we continue building for the future?"

Although the university's emphasis on multidisciplinary experiential education first drew him to apply for the presidency, watching Bradley's faculty and staff operate during the current global pandemic has impressed him much more.

"If you really want to understand an organization, watch it operate in crisis, which is what most organizations are doing today," said Standifird. "And I knew we had some pretty amazing faculty. I knew we had really committed staff. Boy, has that come to the forefront in the last few months, and I've really seen what folks have done to step up to help us navigate this current environment.

"It speaks extremely well for the future of the institution, and that has been so clear in the past several months in a way I don't think I would have been able to see as quickly had it not been for our current environment."

He noted how the university became nimbler in response to the pandemic, more so than perhaps anticipated. Standifird suspects there will be a long-term transformational impact to higher education.

"I don't know that every university's had the same experience. I think some are just hunkering down trying to survive. And yet, as I watch Bradley, one of my best examples is the FOLD (Fundamentals in Online Learning) training we offered last summer. Something like 90% of our faculty signed up on a volunteer basis. This idea of them stepping into the challenge instead of running away from it was remarkable."

He's reached out to other university presidents to discuss their collective experience.

"I found it very powerful," said Standifird. "One of the things I've really come to appreciate and discover is, none of us have a playbook on how to manage this. It doesn't exist."

TOP PRIORITIES

When asked about his first-year goals, Standifird said he'd like to see the community start thinking about Bradley's strategic direction moving forward.



"I'm a strong advocate of building from positions of strength," he said. "One of the things I want to spend a good part of this year doing is collectively having conversations around and understanding the strengths of the institution. I have a sense of what those are, but I really want to have a more sustained dialogue about what that is and then start mapping to a strategic plan moving forward, based on those strengths."

Retention — especially with first-generation students and students of color — is another priority, part of Standifird's goal to make Bradley a more inclusive community. He believes the university does a good job attracting those students, relative to its peer institutions. However, he said more work needs to be done to make them feel welcome and included once they arrive. It's a feeling that resonates with Standifird since no one in his immediate family had a college degree.

"I have a soft spot, as you can imagine, for other first-generation college students because as supportive as my family was, there were just things they couldn't understand or appreciate what I was experiencing," he said. "High on my radar screen is looking at what we're doing to create those systems to support those individuals coming into an environment for which they have no traditional mentorship."

MIDWEST ROOTS GO WEST

Standifird grew up in a middle-income family in Evansville, Ind. His father was a service technician for consumer goods giant 3M while his mother played a traditional role. The family vacations were road trips in a red station wagon, a pastime Standifird still enjoys.

Math and science were early interests, which led to Standifird's pursuing chemical engineering at Purdue. He also served as student body president in his senior year. That's where he got hooked on organizational complexity and understanding organizational life.

While working for oil giant Amoco in Chicago as an engineer, Standifird earned an MBA at Northwestern University and caught the higher ed bug. Having decided he wanted to study organizational theory, one of his advisors told him the place to earn a doctorate was the University of Oregon.

"I didn't anticipate that," said Standifird. "I thought I'd be at a Big Ten school ... I had to pull out a map and figure out where Eugene, Oregon, was. I had no idea."

Those studies took him to the West Coast for almost two decades. After earning his degree in the early 1990s, he taught management at Western Washington

University in Bellingham for four years, during which time he looked for an opportunity to study organizations and economic communities experiencing significant transformation.

Hong Kong — and its transition from a century of British rule — was one possibility, but a colleague convinced him Warsaw, Poland, was the place to see radical organizational change. Standifird said the experience led to his own transformation.

"I had to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, with learning a completely different culture and operate in a completely different environment. It made me far more adaptive than I would have been otherwise.

In 2003, he headed south to a teaching position at the University of San Diego's School of Business. Six years later, he was its associate dean. After two more years in California, Standifird, now married with a family, moved back to his hometown and became dean of the Schroeder Family School of Business Administration at the University of Evansville. The short stint (three years) at Evansville led to his role as dean of Butler University's Andre B. Lacy School of Business; he remained there until he got the call from Bradley.

However, becoming a university president wasn't one of his long-term goals. What intrigued him was the idea of building human potential.

"I don't know that (becoming president) is something I set out to do specifically," said Standifird. "I've had great mentors throughout my career and one was always clear about being very intentional about who you are and what you want to accomplish.

"I spent a fair amount of time thinking about the impact I want to have. So, what drove me from being a faculty member, which is arguably one of the best jobs in the world, to being an administrator is this idea of building institutions that build human potential. That's something to be excited about."

MOVING FORWARD

He takes inspiration from the university's founder, Lydia Moss Bradley, and considers her emotional struggles analogous to what the Bradley community is facing today.

"We're all experiencing things, none of us have ever experienced in our lifetimes and it's okay and completely human to have those experiences and emotions, to have those challenges," said Standifird. "But it shouldn't stop you from moving forward; that's the heart of Lydia's lesson."

FAST FACTS

Favorite vacation spot:
Our backyard

Last book read:
"The Obstacle Is the Way"

Last movie seen:
One of the "Shrek" series

Favorite meal:
Sushi

Siblings:
Two sisters; one older, one younger

On his playlist:
Classical music with birds in the background

So, what does Bradley's new president do for his own mental wellbeing? The self-described nerd said his hobbies include reading (the Stoic philosophers and books on leadership are favorite topics) and landscape/nature photography. That's when he's not serving as the family DJ for his young daughters' dance parties. Back in the day, Standifird was an avid motorcyclist.

"You can't ride a motorcycle and not pay attention; the consequences are too significant. What I like about it is it really forces me to be in the moment ... Photography also forces me to pay attention to details that could be missed ... That's an important part of this job, too."

Of course, if he could, the first thing Standifird would do as president is end the pandemic. Instead, he hopes to create at Bradley a greater sense of hope and optimism, or what he called pragmatic optimism, the potential for seeing things the way they could be.

Although some might call that too daunting a prospect, given how the world is still reeling from its own radical transformation, Stephen Standifird will make sure to pause and reflect, all while keeping his face toward the sunshine.



Busy Behind the Scenes

Although Vivian Standifird understands she's not on the Bradley payroll, she sees herself as part of the team. Her ultimate goal as first lady, she said, is to see the university succeed as an organization. That means taking care of the couple's children, Sorana, 11, and Brianna, 7, and volunteering in the Peoria community.

"Number one, I see myself as being a really good partner for Steve, so I can allow him to do his job without worrying about family," she said. "... I would love to, if the community will have me, help Peoria any way I can. I want to connect (Peoria) with Bradley because I think the university can play a really key role and it should because it's a major employer and a presence."

Her husband returned the compliment, calling his wife the most influential person in his life.

"In addition to being an amazing wife, an amazing mother, she's a great leader," he said. "She's just a very thoughtful partner in terms of anything I'm going through, anything I'm dealing with. She, of course, knows me better than anyone. But she also understands

the context and the environment in which I'm leading."

Her first major project has been leading #BradleyUnite, the campaign created to improve communications and compliance surrounding COVID-19. While reviewing other schools' websites, Standifird realized a missing component was a unifying, cohesive theme.

"I was thankful for the opportunity to be part of the project because it allowed me to get to know (some people) and help with this situation we're in," she said. "It also helps me be able to talk to him about it if I know what's going on."

She brings an impressive set of skills, having come to Bradley with a successful finance career under her belt. She started in



higher education 20-plus years ago at her alma mater, the University of Oregon, as a purchasing assistant before quickly earning a promotion to budget manager.

Oregon was where she met her husband, who was then a doctoral student. When he asked her out for the first time, Standifird wasn't sure if he was serious.

"He invited me to a movie that was made in Hong Kong," she recalled. "And I was born in Hong Kong. So I remember telling my best friend at the time, 'Hey, you know what? I think he needs a translator.' Because I didn't know at that time if he was interested in me or just being friendly."

When he showed up well dressed and took her to a nice restaurant for dinner, Standifird realized the evening wasn't casual fun. By their second date, things began to click. The two saw they both had very serious career aspirations and Standifird enjoyed her future husband's sense of humor.

"I don't know what he appreciated about me. I don't want to put words in (his mouth), but I think we found qualities in each other. It was a very good fit ... two years later we got married."

THE FAMILY AT HOME

With the ongoing pandemic, the family has had to stay close to home. Standifird said they love spending time exploring the woods in their back yard.

After leaving Oregon, Standifird left academe for the corporate world, taking roles of increasing responsibility before she returned to higher ed as controller for the University of San Diego. While in California, she earned her master's in executive leadership.

When the family moved back to the Midwest in 2011, Standifird served as CFO for an industrial distributor for nearly three years. Her last job before becoming Bradley's First Lady was as partner and CFO for Cork Medical/Rehab Medical, a national leader in complex rehab technology and mobility equipment. Standifird only relinquished the position a few months ago.

With the ongoing restrictions due to the pandemic, Standifird hasn't yet been able to get out and volunteer in the community much. Instead, she keeps busy with her daughters, helping with their homework and taking them to multiple weekly dance lessons. She also helps her husband wherever she can.

"You know what, I enjoy it," said Standifird. "Steve would probably, if he said anything about me, would say I'd rather be busy than not busy, I'm that kind of person. I think I'd go crazy if I wasn't busy." **B**