

The Man Behind the Curtain

The 2019 recipient of the Ken White Distinguished Business Officer Award credits some of his success to mentors and colleagues. But don't mistake his modesty for a lack of ambition. Leadership "is something I run toward."



Dallas Joseph (center) with his son Evan Joseph, wife Tonya Joseph and son Dallas Joseph III at the 2019 NBOA Leadership Awards Lunch.

Dallas Joseph is the 2019 recipient of the Ken White Distinguished Business Officer Award, NBOA's highest honor. Since 2000, he has been vice president of finance and operations at Baylor School, a boarding and day school with 1,088 students in grades 6 through 12 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. An active volunteer on many community and national boards, Joseph served on the NBOA Board from 2005 to 2013, culminating in his role as Board Chair.

Net Assets: Congratulations again on the Ken White Award! Have you recovered from the high of receiving a standing ovation at the NBOA Annual Meeting, with your family there to celebrate with you?

Dallas Joseph: I have. My family was so proud of me, and I was proud to have them there. When my sons were growing up, they had no idea why I was always going off to workshops and working such long days. What I didn't get a chance to say in my speech was that my dad had been my role model too.

Net Assets: How did your childhood inform your career?

Joseph: I grew up in Beaumont, Texas, 80 miles from Houston, and somehow I always knew I would work in finance. My grandfather owned a business, and my dad more or less had his own business opening restaurants and jazz clubs and even restaurants at racetracks. From them, I knew I wanted to be in business in one shape or form, but of course I had no idea I would be on the nonprofit side.

Net Assets: You've been at Baylor since 2000, after spending several years in the business offices of three universities. What drew you from higher ed to K-12?

Joseph: To be honest, I applied to Baylor not because I wanted the job but because I wanted the interview. I didn't know what the interview process was like! At the time, I was vice president of finance at Fisk University, a historically black college in Nashville. I had been recruited for that job and for two other university jobs before it, after getting my start on the for-profit side at Frito-Lay in Dallas. When the universities hired me, all three were struggling, and it seems I had become known as something of a turnaround guy. But being known as a turnaround guy isn't always a positive thing, because it can be hard to establish long-term relationships. Plus, my kids were getting older, and my wife said I couldn't keep working 12-to-15-hour days. So that led me to Baylor School.

I applied for the job without doing any research. When I got the interview, I just drove to the campus. That's when I realized that this is something special, and I didn't want to blow it. So I went across the street to a pay phone, called my contact at Baylor

and said I would be 40 minutes late. Then I went to the nearest library, spent 15 minutes reading about the school, came back and did the interview. At the time, I was thinking, "There's no way I'm getting this job." I drove back to Nashville regretting not being prepared for the first time in my life. Thankfully I did get the job. It took five years before I could tell my colleagues that story!

Net Assets: What has helped you stay so engaged in your work at Baylor for all these years?

Joseph: The number-one thing is that when Baylor brought me in, they made the strategic decision to promote the position from business manager to vice president of finance and operations. They wanted someone at the 50,000-foot level, someone to connect the dots across the organization. So, first and foremost, I knew I was seen as a strategic hire; I didn't have to fight that battle. That really gave me the ability to think long term and to stay focused on five to 10 years ahead, which is so much more rewarding than the day-to-day.

Number two is being at an institution that year in and year out invests the resources to be the best school in the country. This includes investing in its staff. Early in my career I made a commitment to acquire every tool possible that might help me grow, and to be around people who can move me to the next level. Since my first NBOA workshop right after I started at Baylor, I have seen how committed business officers are to acquire the skills and knowledge they need.

Number three is having the right team of people. Our business office has seven people — and they're the right people, in the right places. I invest in them too. I always bring at least three or four people to NBOA's Annual Meeting, for example. It doesn't work for me alone to have all the knowledge. I need a team that pushes me!

Net Assets: You've had an active hand in what seems like every administrative unit of the school, from campus police to auxiliary services to purchasing and contracts. What have you enjoyed most?

Joseph: The most fun has been a responsibility given to me early on — to help Baylor become known nationally. The school's leaders wanted me to get out and be involved nationally, so that

brought me to organizations like NBOA, NAIS and EMA, as well as to local groups. It's been very rewarding to get first-hand knowledge of how other schools are using data and information, and then figuring out what we need to do to tweak our operations. Being on local boards, in turn, has allowed me to have a positive impact on issues that really help people.

The second aspect of my job that I've really enjoyed has been the ability to work with colleagues across the campus, operational as well as academic. Relationships are very important to me, as my responsibilities include knowing what's happening across the campus.

Net Assets: A big part of that responsibility involves Baylor's enormous campus. How have you been able to maintain this asset without overtaxing your budget?

Joseph: It's an 800-acre campus with a million square feet under rooftops. Yes, it's a large undertaking in terms of the human resources and dollars needed to maintain it. But the campus also makes Baylor the school it is. It's a huge part of our success in recruiting and retaining students; in fact, we like to believe that once we get families to the campus, we never lose them. We learned a long time ago that we can't keep increasing tuition to help maintain our campus, so we've focused on finding stories that connect our stakeholders with it, keep them engaged and make them want to invest in us. Thankfully, we have a committed base that has provided us with the resources we need. Our \$200 million fiscal plant has less than \$13 million in deferred maintenance and less than \$16 million in deferred debt.

We've also grown our endowment from \$50 million to \$150 million. So it's not like we're only investing in our campus. We've been able to grow everything.

Net Assets: Tell us more about how Baylor has stayed so healthy in this very competitive time for independent schools.

Joseph: Number one, we're fortunate that Baylor is part of the heart and soul of the Chattanooga community. I think it goes back to 1893, when the school was established as an all-boys military school. Chattanooga is also committed to private education more broadly; it's a town of 175,000 people with 15 or 16 independent schools. Number two is our stakeholders, who are committed to providing the resources we need. This includes our board's focus on policies and procedures

that make us as efficient as we can be. We've always been serious about how we run budgets. Proof is in our tuition increases, which we've been able to cap at 2-3 percent a year, even in 2008.

Net Assets: In your acceptance remarks for this award, you said you were a bit uncomfortable with the attention it brought. You referenced the Wizard of Oz, and said, "I like the idea of being behind the curtain, the guy turning the dials to make things happen." What has helped you feel comfortable with your leadership role at Baylor?

Joseph: I'm uncomfortable being in the spotlight, because it's not just me getting this work done. But I'm not uncomfortable being in a leadership role. In fact, it's something I run toward. This why I think it's so important for CFOs and aspiring CFOs to get involved in organizations like NBOA. Because by acquiring skills and knowledge, you can always come to the table with the facts. And that's what makes you comfortable with that leadership role.

This reminds me of a conversation we started a long time ago at NBOA, about how to position the CFO to be that strategic leader. I've always said that just having the role doesn't make you the strategic partner or leader. You have to work to develop the resources and tools you need for that position. Continuous professional development is a big part of this.

Net Assets: You're known as a generous mentor to other professionals. Why is mentoring so important to you, especially in working with younger professionals of color?

Joseph: I've always been driven by a sense of purpose beyond my job description. I was lucky that people invested in me early on, and I've wanted to give back to others as well. I do feel especially strongly about helping African-Americans, as there seem to be so few males in particular in this industry. Any time I can help a young African-American man or woman become better at their work, and give them an opportunity to look into a world they otherwise would not see, I think I owe that to them and to the profession.

Net Assets: What do you think it will take to bring greater diversity to independent school leadership, and to the business office in particular?

Joseph: When I was in college, not once did I hear about the nonprofit world. Everyone in finance was focused on major corporations, high finance, making lots of money. Yet I think the for-profit financial world experiences the same challenges involving diversity as nonprofits. So I think we start by expanding the number of African-Americans in the high-finance space. Then we put the avenues in place to bring them into nonprofits and private schools. That means reaching out to college placement offices and historically black colleges; letting them know about the opportunities and our desire to have a more diverse workforce.

Net Assets: You've also been an active board member of several other organizations. Why is volunteer leadership so important to you?

Joseph: Every organization is different. Take the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga. It wasn't until I got involved that I learned about the many other charitable organizations the foundation helps. This includes sending African-American kids to college, investing in affordable housing for single moms, putting together food pantries, partnering with corporations and school boards... I think the foundation really moves the needle in terms of helping people day to day.

Then there are boards like the Enrollment Management Association. Not only do I get to share my talents with high-level experts, but I gain tremendously in my own professional development. It's been a wonderful experience, and I've brought great information back to my own school and board.

Net Assets: What are your hopes for your profession going forward?

Joseph: I hope that business officers continue to invest in NBOA as the association that provides us with professional development and best practices. I also hope that we in the profession take the time to reach back and invest in new controllers and accountants, and give them opportunities to lead. There's going to be huge turnover in our profession, and it's up to the leaders of today to find the leaders of tomorrow. I hope we take this responsibility not only to share our power, but to share it early enough that they will be ready to lead. **N**