

## PROFILE

MICHELLE PURNELL-HEPBURN:

Giving Credit Where Credit is Due *By Nancy Gardner*

You could say Michelle Purnell-Hepburn (BA 1979, MBA 1982) has excellent credit history. She has, after all, been employed since the age of five, when her parents, who helped found Sentinel Credit Union and Liberty Bank of Seattle, put her to work stamping credit union brochures. And Purnell-Hepburn, the vice president and chief financial officer of Seattle Metropolitan Credit Union, is quick to give credit—mainly to her faith and strong upbringing by her parents—where credit is due.

“I was blessed to have parents who demonstrated love in such a tangible way,” she says. “My parents taught me I could do anything I put my mind to. They taught me to be my best, to work hard, and that it’s a privilege to learn and further one’s education. Education was a means to be upwardly mobile.”

The path to her current position included stints working in virtually

every position at a bank—from her toddler days to those of teller to financial analyst. It’s a journey similarly taken by her parents, who migrated from Tennessee to Seattle in order to establish Seattle’s first African-American bank, Liberty Bank of Seattle in 1968. Her father, James, served as president of Liberty Bank from 1972 until 1986, while her mother,

Mardine, worked as an internal auditor for the IRS. Michelle also learned by example from her sister, 19 years her senior, about the value that an advanced education brings—she also studied business and graduated with a degree in law.

While she believes her graduate coursework prepared her very well for her career path, she says that in the early ’80s, very few African-American women were entering the world of finance, and therefore she was not always encouraged to follow her chosen career path. Luckily, she had people like her sister, who she calls her ‘rock,’ to show her that it was indeed possible to follow one’s dreams.

“Back then, academic advisors saw very few minority women who expressed an interest in graduate business studies. I just loved accounting and finance, and I stuck with what I enjoyed and did well in.”

Thad Spratlen, professor emeritus of marketing at the Business School who

has known Michelle since her undergraduate days, believes her success has come not only from hard work, but from her family role models.

“She learned well from her father’s entrepreneurial discipline and determination to succeed. She kept on performing despite being told that there was not a place for her in financial management. That made her stronger.”

With familial roots so strong in the financial services industry, it’s no surprise that Purnell-Hepburn has followed in her parents’ footsteps. Not content with earning a master’s degree in business administration, the 48-year-old has continued adding to her academic record. In 1994, she completed Western CUNA Management School, graduating with high honors, and in 2006 she completed the Credit Union Executive Society’s CEO Institute, earning her a Certified Chief Executive designation.

Earning these advanced professional degrees, says Purnell-Hepburn, will give her the preparation she needs to eventually attain her goal of becoming CEO. They have helped her see what it’s like from the top looking down.

“I know I will become a CEO—I’m not worried about when. I just know what’s important is to do all the things one can do to be prepared.”

Her tendencies toward professional over-achievement are also evident in her personal life. At the age of 40, she decided to dabble in athletics, and has since finished three triathlons and started studying hula with Na Hanu ‘O Ku’uleialoha, a local hula school based in Burien. She participated in her first group hula competition several years ago.

The avid competitor is perhaps her own toughest opponent and critic by her own self-admission, but it’s her faith she says that keeps her strong.

“You can choose to be happy or you can choose to be miserable. I believe in the pursuit of excellence—one can choose either scarcity or abundance.”

Judging from her office, where the walls display quotes from employees, there’s an abundance of input she routinely seeks from her employees. Their ideas and input have served to create the mission statement for her departments, which support the mission statement of the Credit Union: “Honesty is our pledge, quality is our result, and together we create peace of mind.”

About 14 employees report to Purnell-Hepburn, where she’s in charge of financial statements and the accounts recovery activities that ultimately impact the approximate 37,000 credit union members.

“I see myself as a storyteller,” she says. “With accounting and accounts recovery, you take a look at history and you can tell what’s happened and why. With finance, I’m telling a story based on this historical data, so that decision makers can decide where we’re going in the future.”

Believing in a bright future ahead, for both herself and future black businessmen and women, she believes in the importance of giving back: she is a regular guest speaker for the UW Association of Black Business Students, for which she served as president during graduate school, and participates in the Business and Economic Development Center’s activities.

“Our parents taught us to never forget where you’ve come from. You don’t get anywhere unless you’ve helped others because you were once helped by others.” ■

## PROFILE

MARISSA KAISER &amp; CO:

## Young Alums Mix, Mingle at Alma Balmer

*By Ed Kromer*

Alma Balmer founders Marissa Kaiser, Adam Stalker, Rachel Byrne, Maureen Crawford, Hagen Ganem and Andrew Hoang.

The Center for Urban Horticulture has transformed into a happening happy hour. Swells of conversation saturate the air. Freshly minted professionals spin tales from the job, personal and home fronts, or reminisce about fast times at the Business School.

It’s the fourth-annual Alma Balmer reception for young alumni, held in September.

This is how the party started: Marissa Jade Kaiser (formerly Ng) (BA 2000) joined the Business School Alumni Advisory Council as its young alumni representative in 2002. She quickly realized that, while there were many opportunities for recent MBA and Executive MBA graduates to connect, there were no such events for younger alums of the undergraduate program. Along with classmates Kyle Vixie (BA 2000) and Adam Stalker (BA 2000), Kaiser met with the Business School’s alumni relations manager who asked what they would like to do to rectify the situation. “I said, ‘We have to throw

a party,’” Kaiser recalls. “That was the magic formula. And it worked.”

Andrew Hoang (BA 2000), Julie Williams (BA 2001), Kimberly Saxton (formerly Walker) (BA 2001), Rachel Byrne (BA 2001) and Hagen Ganem (BA 2002) joined the planning committee. And with help from the Business School and UW

Alumni Association, some grassroots marketing, a little luck and some donated wine from Chateau Ste. Michelle, the event drew 130 people the first year. It has since grown into an early autumn tradition, the most casual of homecomings for young alums, with no strings attached. “It’s just a great way to network and connect with the Business School without having to fill out forms or join anything,” Kaiser says.

But youth is fleeting. Kaiser knows that she and the original founders are moving into that not-so-young alumni category, so they are easing out of Alma Balmer planning. “We’re getting older, and we want to have the organizers be people who relate to new graduates,” she says. “We’re looking for new people to step up.”

Right on cue, the next generation of young alumni leadership is beginning to take shape, with Angela Pak (BA 2004), Sara Malcolm (BA 2005) and Long Phan (BA 2006) taking over the torch this year. ■