

PROFILE

TOM PORTER:

Man of business, letters, philanthropy and action

By Eric Nobis

When Tom Porter (MBA 1959) “retired” in 1999 from his post as executive vice president of Bank of America, he had helped its affiliate, Seafirst, to become the most profitable \$10 billion+ bank in the nation. In the years since, he served as lead director of Shurgard Storage Centers and the chairman of Flexcar before both were sold. And he’s currently the chairman of Porter Investments LLC and on the boards of Charter Bank and Coldstream Capital Management.

But mainly, Tom is on the lookout for people who can keep up with him. At 74, he’s entered the phase of life in which “most folks want to sleep on a soft pillow,” but in his calculus new outdoor experiences trump sleeping comfortably.

In point of fact, his peregrinations have found him hiking in over half of the US national parks—which he believes are America’s true national treasures. He has hiked across the Grand Canyon, traversed Scotland’s Isle of Sky, walked with his wife beside 150 miles of the River Thames, run the New York Marathon, kayaked in Glacier Bay National Park, climbed Mt. Rainier, attained Mt. Everest base camp (17,000 ft) and scaled peaks in Antarctica.

The scholarly gentleman

You might be wondering how Tom finds time to be a voracious reader and

author of 13 books. As an author, his works have ranged from books on electronic data processing and auditing to personal financial and investment management to the annals of Husky athletics. His latest is “A Football Band of Brothers” (2007), the story of a previously overlooked national champion Husky football team (1960) that became great because of their unity and willingness to pay the price.

Tom continues teaching business classes, extending an academic career he pursued in addition to several successful decades in the private sector. He recently taught a course on financial planning for MBAs and undergraduates at the Foster School in which each student prepared a personal financial plan as the final examination. He is currently gearing up for a short course on the subject offered by the School’s Executive Education.



In the years since graduating with his MBA, Porter’s determination to always work with a purpose in mind hasn’t changed. He cites three areas of life that can all benefit greatly from careful management: time and self management, health, and money management. He has been proactive in all three.

Where did he get his talent for business, teaching, and stewardship? To

begin with, his parents were Salvation Army officers. The Army’s motto of OTHERS has been a key driver of Tom’s behavior for most of his life. In addition, when you ask him about other motivators, he’ll be still for a brief moment, a gleam in his eye, and say something like: “Well, I could jump out of airplanes reciting poetry but couldn’t hit a sharp slider—so why not go to business school?”

The not-quite natural

A 1954 graduate of Rutgers University with an English degree and All-American distinction on the baseball diamond, Tom was pursued by the Pittsburgh Pirates but the US Army had first call. He completed the Infantry Officers’ School and the Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and then was assigned to Fort Lewis. There he was an infantry company commander and then the aide-de-camp to the post’s deputy commanding general, giving him a high-level view of the Army decision-making process.

And it was during this time that Tom met his wife, Dixie Jo, a 1959 graduate of the UW with a Phi Beta Kappa key. She was Seafair Queen in 1956.

As he completed his MBA and joined Touche Ross (Deloitte & Touche as of the 1989 merger), the tradition of Big 8 business and financial consulting was nascent. He signed on as a staff consultant, assisting clients on the design of management information systems, evaluating computer systems with “discs as big as dinner platters,” and auditing both private and public companies.

He took three years off from Touche to earn his PhD from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Business before returning to the firm as its national director of professional development. The position afforded a nice balance across his love of teaching, satisfaction in helping people, and for applying business acumen.

Back to business school

But his love of education brought Tom back to the UW Business School, where he was in residence from 1966 to 1974 in a variety of roles, from director of external affairs (including executive development programs) to professor of management control, information systems and business policy. In all of these roles, Tom brought his passion and instincts to bear, forming ideas around information management that are in application today. But what was truly transformational for him was the interlude from 1967 to 1968, when he took a leave from the Business School to work for Charles Odegaard, then president of UW, in the capacity of director of planning for the university at-large.

Odegaard was doing groundbreaking work to establish the tri-partite system for colleges that is a matter of course for prospective students today: research institutions, four-year schools and community colleges. During this time, Tom led an effort to implement program planning and budgeting in all schools and colleges of the university focused on how to think differently about the perennial challenges of academia. A year later, back at the Business School, Porter helped convene think-tank sessions with academic, business

and government leaders that would often proceed into the wee hours.

Humble steward

In stewardship, as in business, Tom’s actions speak louder than words. He’d much rather talk about his recent trip to Alaska where he traveled on a sled pulled by six dogs 150 miles across a portion of the Bering Sea than regale you with how many community boards he’s sat on, how many articles he’s published or how much consulting and mentoring he’s done along the way. But his humility doesn’t change the fact that he’s led campaigns netting over a cumulative \$150,000,000 for a long list of non-profits that include the Dale Turner Foundation, the Juvenile Diabetes Fund, the Lakeside School, the Ryther Child Center, the Salvation Army, United Way’s Pacesetter and Leadership drives, and the University of Washington’s Campaign for the Student Athlete. In honor of his work, he has received numerous awards, including the Salvation Army’s Others award and the Washington Society of CPAs’ Humanitarian Award. For his many community activities, he was selected to carry the Olympic Torch on a leg of its journey in Seattle to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

So while you might read one of his books, see him in an interview, take a class from him or just grab a cup of coffee in University Village, what Tom would really like you to do is join him for a little stroll across a ravine or up a precipice or two. ■