

Keeping Your Eyes Up

Dotti G. Bechtol '97

Dotti G. Bechtol '97 had already worked her way up to a vice president role at a highly successful steel company when she decided to attend Chatham to earn her bachelors in psychology and economics in the late nineties. While working at the Levinson Steel Company, Bechtol co-oversaw mergers and acquisitions. She traveled around the country negotiating agreements that would help the once-small company grow to 24 locations and \$250 million in sales during her tenure. What's the draw of college at that point you might ask? "I felt like I didn't have what everybody else had. It was awkward in certain circumstances when people started talking about college; I was at a VP level and didn't have a degree. That was one of the things that influenced me going back. I wanted to know that I could do it, and I wanted to have the paper," says Bechtol.

Ultimately, Chatham's Gateway program—created as a means to support adult women juggling responsibilities in addition to their schoolwork—was what convinced Bechtol

to attend Chatham: "I had looked at Pitt and Duquesne and it was the Gateway program that brought me to Chatham. I had taken some classes at Pitt and I liked the idea of smaller class sizes at Chatham. I liked that it was a blend of ages."

And as a Gateway student in her late 30s, Bechtol certainly had an impactful Chatham experience. Despite attending part-time, she was able to graduate in three years thanks to the experiential learning credits she earned via her life and career experience. She also formed a pretty epic bond with retired Chatham psychology Professor, Tom Hershberger: "He was my mentor at Chatham. As I was doing my tutorial, my mother had an accident. I went to him and said, 'I can't finish the tutorial, I'm going to have to drop out.' And he said, 'Oh no, you're not going to drop out. We're going to get you through this.' He also liked cars so we started most conversations talking about cars. He had never done any racing, and I told him, 'When you're ready, call me and I'll teach you how to race.' So I did and now I race with him."

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Not to bury the lede but, yes, Bechtol is also a race car driver. She attributes her pursuit of racing at least in part to Chatham. “Chatham gave me confidence and broadened my view of things. I learned that I could step out of my comfort zone and be okay. It was right after Chatham that we got more involved in racing. I started to feel more confident that I could learn to race. Other people do it. Why can’t I?”

As a girl, Bechtol’s parents both had an affinity for cars, particularly her father, who gave her the task of scrubbing his cars’ whitewall tires with a pad. Bechtol learned to drive in her mom’s 1968 Mercury Cougar and when she met her husband, John, he had just sold his Jaguar to afford law school. Together, Bechtol and John started autocrossing every summer and then, in an effort to get more “seat time,” a.k.a. time racing on the track, they opted to start vintage car racing. First, they joined a car club and took a series of driving instruction courses followed by race track courses.

Ultimately, they earned their racing licenses at a multi-day class in California and have since raced everywhere from Canada to Pittsburgh to Florida.

And though racing is a shared hobby for Bechtol and John, that doesn’t mean they go easy on each other whilst driving head to head: “We’re both competitive. We’re not going to cut each other a break. The only thing that would stop us is if we decided that there is a chance of us rubbing fenders. [That would] blow the racing budget for the rest of the year,” says Bechtol.

Nowadays, Bechtol drives a 1972 Alfa Romeo and is often the only woman competing on the track: “I think women carry a lot in their minds and are forced to do a lot of multitasking. Racing is relaxing to me. I can only concentrate on what I’m doing. I can’t let another thought or thing on my to-do list come into my mind because things happen very quickly on the racetrack. My car goes up to 135 miles an hour.”

As a racing instructor and board member of Pittsburgh’s beloved Vintage Grand Prix Race, Bechtol is motivated to bring people of all genders to the sport. In fact, training novices at Pittsburgh’s International Raceway is her favorite: “It’s very rewarding to me to have an instruction day with a novice. By the end of the day after classroom and track instruction, [they are able to] successfully navigate the track. Sometimes by the end of the day, they can even go out on their own. A couple of years ago, Pittsburgh International Raceway did an instruction session for women taught by women. It was a hit. The women liked not having men competing with them. I [really appreciated] the chance to work with women and watch how they learn from other women.”

In her instruction, Bechtol aims for her pupils to master the art of driving slowly before they truly put their pedal to the metal: “There’s a saying in racing that you

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have to learn to go slow before you go fast. You get the skills down, and then you can gradually put the accelerator down a little bit more every time you go around the track. You can go at your own speed based on how you learn.”

Racing mantras have served Bechtol well both on and off the track. As an executive consultant who serves on various nonprofit boards throughout Pittsburgh, including Family Links and a subsidiary of the women’s shelter called Civil Law Project, Bechtol has used the second half of her career as a vehicle to improve her community. Helping to make Pittsburgh a better place is crucial to Bechtol, and it’s one of the goals that has helped pave the way for her wide-ranging and ambitious

adventures: “I think your goals should motivate you; it’s okay if they seem lofty. It’s like racing. You’re taught when you’re driving the track to keep your eyes up. You don’t want to look straight down over the hood of your car because then you have no time to change what you’re doing, but if you can keep your eyes up and take little bites out of the track in front of you, you have time to make adjustments. In the end, you cut your time down and achieve what you wanted to achieve. I worked really hard at Chatham, and I worked hard in my career. When I make a commitment to help somebody, I do it. I find it pays off. You get to your goal and it’s rewarding.” ▲