



THERE IS A MOMENT FROM PRESIDENT LINDA L. M. BENNETT'S LIFE THAT, IN MANY WAYS, NOT ONLY DEFINES HER LOVE OF EDUCATION BUT SET HER ON THE PATH TO A LIFE-LONG CAREER IN IT. She was 4 years old and throwing a temper tantrum on the streets of Cincinnati, Ohio, because she was too young to attend school with her older brother Jerry. "I was absolutely having a *meltdown*," she says, her telltale wry humor surfacing.

RITES OF PASSAGE:

A PRESIDENTIAL PATH

by C. L. Stambush





Jerry and Linda Mayfield



Dr. Bennett with granddaughter, Chelsea



Dr. Linda and Stephen Bennett



Ushering her off the street and into a shop where a friend worked, her mother explained the scenario behind the scene, and the friend said, “Take her up to the school and test her to see if she can go.” That hadn’t occurred to Mrs. Josephine Mayfield, despite her precocious daughter’s ability to read and write. “I read a lot, so I lived in other worlds, and she’d give me letters from her mother to practice my writing,” says Bennett, noting her mother’s motive may have been to keep her amused and out from underfoot.

Some children entering school prematurely aren’t as emotionally equipped as those who matriculate on a traditional timeline, but one look at the expression on her face in a photograph taken when she was in the first grade excises any notion of Bennett being anything other than determined. “During my younger years, if you’d said I was driven, you wouldn’t have been far off.”

That drive—born of a cocktail of DNA, personality and having witnessed what life without an education offered—shaped her future.

Neither of her parents (born in Pulaski County, Kentucky, during Prohibition) finished high school, although her father later earned a GED in his 40s and discovered he had an aptitude for math. Instead, Wayne

Everett Mayfield joined the Army during World War II and served in the European theater. Later, back home and married with a young son, he gathered his family and migrated north to Cincinnati, Ohio (where Bennett was born), as part of the diaspora of people from the Appalachian area seeking better jobs in the early 1950s, and found employment in factories working nightshifts.

Bennett describes herself as being a “bookworm” and “self-contained” during school, and says her childhood was “relatively uneventful,” except for one evolutionary moment that redirected her life, even more than testing into kindergarten early.

In 1967—a time of free love, race riots, redistricting and desegregation moves—Bennett, a junior at Hughes High School, returned from summer break to discover the school’s educational mission had changed. “I was on the college-preparatory track, and they’d changed my entire schedule,” she says, “giving me five hours of executive secretary training instead.”

The switch snapped something inside her, and what emerged was a 15-year-old she did not recognize. Bennett called her mother and said, “Call Walnut Hills High School and see

if they’ll accept me.” She’d already taken and passed the stringent entrance exam required to enroll in Walnut Hills—one of the nation’s best all-city, college-preparatory high schools.

The elite new school presented a dual learning curve, scholastically and culturally. “I’d had a couple of years of French at Hughes, where we were still doing vocabulary drills. I walked into class at Walnut Hills and they were reading French literature,” Bennett says. “The teacher had studied at the Sorbonne.”

Bennett embraced the challenges, despite two long bus rides to her new school and being of a different social class than her peers. There she found, instead of friends dropping out due to pregnancy, a supportive faculty that proved invaluable. In her Sino-Soviet Totalitarian class, where they read the original texts of Chairman Mao, her teacher Harriet Russell recognized Bennett’s talent as a researcher and writer, and encouraged her to attend Smith College.

“It was in that setting and all those years of being self-contained and reading a lot, that I blossomed,” she says. “Everything in that atmosphere was about going to college, and that’s what I wanted.” Her family wanted it

for her too, especially her father. “He was really a strong advocate,” Bennett says. “He didn’t care what I studied. He just said, ‘You’ll have more options.’”

A product of both of her role model parents—her mother’s people skills and her father’s stick-to-itiveness—Bennett dreamed of being an attorney while earning her undergrad degree in political science from University of Cincinnati. She continued toying with that career all the way through her poli sci master and doctorate programs, and up until she accepted a position as a visiting assistant professor at Wittenberg University. “I was so convinced I was going to get a degree in law that the bus driver called me Perry Mason,” she says. But, when true love calls, the wise don’t question it, and Bennett found hers when she began teaching at Wittenberg. “I love teaching,” she says, “and really became a good teacher because of Wittenberg.”

Over the course of her 13 years at the Springfield, Ohio, college, she rose to full professorship and department chair before being wooed to Northern Kentucky University (NKU) as a department chair. “NKU was a big learning experience, going from a private church-affiliated college to a public university,” Bennett says, “but I really liked it.” When she later left to become dean of the College of Arts and Science at Appalachian State University (ASU), she told her colleague at NKU that if she ever had the opportunity to return, she would. When he called a few years later she says, “I thought, ‘you’re calling me back.’” But no, he wanted to tell her about a provost position at the University of Southern Indiana “It’s a place a lot like us,” he said, “and I think you’d be a good fit,” she recalls. “He was right.”

Bennett immersed herself in USI’s story, and its unique history hooked her. “I had never heard of an institution where people took out payroll deductions to pay for the land,” she says. It was much more than the University’s founding, however, that captivated her heart. “I liked the way people interacted with each other,” she says. “They looked at you. The students looked at you. They were curious. They were interested.”

- Educating Rita* is her favorite film because it speaks to the way she views education.
- Was a political commentator from 1992-1994 for WHIO-TV in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Her retirement plan includes “me time” on a chaise lounge with a thick book.
- Her “babies” are a cat named Ally after singer Alison Krause, and two longhaired Dachshunds named Buttercup and Fannie.
- Loves watching Major League Baseball with her husband Stephen.
- She has a photo of Betty Rice’s plum pudding recipe (used in the Madrigal Feast) on her phone, but won’t cook it or anything else that calls for 30 cups of flour.
- Sings along with her favorite female vocalists: Mary J. Blige, Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt and more.
- Admits to being a drama queen, especially when reading stories to children.
- Spent part of kindergarten under the piano for talking too much to her best friend.
- Loves commencement ceremonies.



Still finds the law fascinating.



Believes any kind of ice cream is good for you.



Grew up believing she was part Cherokee but a year ago discovered she was less than 1 percent; instead, she's 48 percent Irish.



The L. M. in Linda L. M. Bennett stands for Louise Mayfield (her middle and maiden names).



She has an "inner Maggie Smith."



Has a "perverse" enjoyment of the political process.



Didn't drive a car until she married in 1977.



Her mother made her wedding dress.



Taking her first cruise—an Alaskan inland passage—this summer.



Is a chocaholic.



As provost, the inveterate dabbler expanded her interests and broadened her education in unfamiliar subjects. "When I was a department chair at Wittenberg and NKU I loved working with colleagues, and when I became dean at ASU, I had a lot of fun going on archeological digs, listening to poetry readings and working with the Appalachian Cultural Museum to preserve some cultural elements," she says. "As USI's provost, I got to play across all those departments and more; I got to work with colleagues in business and health and science."

Six years as provost led to nine years as USI's first female president, a role that allowed the political scientist to practice for the first time what she'd studied and taught others all her life. Within a few months of taking the position, legislators summoned her to Indianapolis to explain why USI's tuition increased. "I felt sweat trickle down my back," she says, noting the increase was necessary due to a decline in state funding and a sour economy. "I'm sitting there telling myself, 'You have a Ph.D. in this subject. You've taught courses on Congress and the presidency. You can do this.'" And, she did.

As president, Bennett's leadership focused on raising USI's visibility and telling the institution's story to help people understand its unique niche in Indiana's higher educational system, an effort that's resulted in transforming some legislators into USI cheerleaders. "When I go to Indianapolis now, there are legislators who 'get it,'" she says.

Before Bennett's awareness campaign and strategic planning (she implemented the first in USI's history), legislators and members of the Indiana Commission of Higher Education didn't know what to think of USI. "We weren't a research institution and we weren't a research institution wannabe," Bennett says. "We are different, but that difference is our magic. The fact that we are very focused on the individual student. The fact that we value the quality of that teaching exchange. The fact that we are very externally focused in getting our students out there into the community, into businesses, into not-for-profits, into the world of the performing arts. Getting them

out there to experience it is a terrific place to be for this University."

Tasked with advancing USI's vision of *shaping the future through learning and innovation* in an increasingly competitive educational sphere required Bennett to implement a "slightly more selective" entrance policy for the University. While USI was never an open admission campus, Bennett says, "We did have a high proportion of students we accepted who really had challenges with college-level work." Improving students' success rates, both in and after college, meant raising admission GPA requirements. "That wasn't about trying to posture in terms of being a 'public ivy.' That was about being very clear about the expectation of what it would take to succeed at the college level," she says. "I think sending that message is a true advantage to high school students and high school guidance counselors. It helps them to say, 'yes, you have to work hard even through your senior year.'"

Lifting up students has always been Bennett's passion. She tweets their successes ("I love to brag") and invites them to her office for chats, inquiring if they have internships and offering to help them get one. "I tell

people my job is to brag and to nag. If I go to a restaurant in town, I'll actually interview the wait staff saying, 'Are you a student? At USI? Do you want to come by and see me and talk?'" she says, "and I'll give them my card."

Meeting, knowing and encouraging students are the *crème de la crème* for Bennett. "The best part is seeing them walk across that stage and get their diploma," says the self-confessed ceremony junkie. "You just feel such pride, and then you wonder what their next steps are going to be."

Being president isn't all joy. Some aspects of it have kept Bennett awake at night, and some of the harder decisions she's been compelled to act on have left her frustrated and wishing she could have done more for the students, faculty and staff, especially in the arena of state funding. "We get good support in Indianapolis, but our state funding per Hoosier student is still in the lower ranges," she says, adding, "we are still one of the most affordable colleges in the state of Indiana and the multistate region." Given that, she says, "I've been disgustingly happy in this job."

When Bennett became president, one of the founding fathers gave her some advice:

Decide what you want to do, and don't stay too long. During her 15 years of service—not long enough for faculty, staff and students who wish she'd stay or at least be cloned—Bennett has accomplished what she set out to do. In her wake, she leaves the University's cultural legacy she inherited from her predecessors, Dr. David Rice and Dr. Ray Hoops, infused with her own brand of leadership. "Whenever you feel as if you've moved things in the direction you've hoped for," she says, "then fresh eyes need to be brought in...and you can't be afraid of that."

NOTE: In the 1967 class photograph on this feature's opening spread, Dr. Bennett is in the second row, second person from the left.