

News

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***Freeman takes new position at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas

DALLAS -- Abby Freeman has become the administrative equivalent of the Rock of Gibraltar -- an inspiring symbol of stability, strength and integrity. But recently UT Southwestern's rock did something quite un-Gibraltar-like: She moved.

After 13 years in the graduate school, working with three deans, Freeman left her position as director of administration and assumed new duties as director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Minority Affairs. Her new job is one created recently by UT Southwestern President Kern Wildenthal.

"It's especially important that, at all levels of the institution, everybody has an equal opportunity for advancement and fair treatment," Wildenthal said. "I have recently posted a new high-level position that will be the director of a newly expanded office of equal opportunity and career advancement, which will focus on making sure that all of our progress and all of our opportunities are extended throughout the medical center."

All agree that the new post is a sensitive and difficult one, but one for which Freeman is supremely suited.

"I think Abby embodies the elements that are crucial to her being successful in this position," says Dr. William Neaves, executive vice president for academic affairs, who served as graduate school dean for eight years. "She has to be trusted by employees who feel that they have not been given a fair shake. She also has to be trusted by the administration of the institution in order to accomplish what she needs to accomplish."

Dr. Mary-Jane Gething, associate dean of the graduate school, concurs: "It's a sensitive job, and I think what will make Abby such a good choice for it is the feeling of integrity you get from her. In every dealing, you know that it's done out of fairness, and everything is done correctly and properly."

Not surprisingly, Freeman's first goal is to "make sure that any employee who feels that he or she has been discriminated against will get a just and fair hearing and that if we need to rectify situations, those situations are rectified."

Her long-term goal is to facilitate career development for campus employees. She hopes to raise awareness of the educational opportunities in the Dallas area and help employees upgrade their skills and marketability.

"We want every employee to feel good about coming to work here and to know that they're making a contribution to the university," she says. "We must also ensure that every employee has an equal opportunity to be the best that he or she wants to be."

Helping others is no new task. As director of administration, Freeman handled the day-to-day operation of the graduate school, working with the chairmen of each graduate program, UT System representatives and students.

"I relied on Abby as the ultimate authority and source of administrative information about the graduate school," Neaves says. "She is a very talented individual, very sensitive, ... who has a unique ability to navigate through the procedures of a state institution."

That ability has given Freeman a reputation of never saying "no," of accomplishing the impossible.

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"The marvelous thing about Abby is that even if the idea is strictly not feasible the way it was first thought out, she'll find ways to do it," Gething says.

Gary Means, a third-year biochemistry graduate student and president of the Graduate Student Organization, says, "You could always count on her to do what she said she'd do and something more. In all my dealings with her, she's always, always done everything plus something."

But no matter how busy, Freeman never loses sight of the people around her.

"You can always walk into her office, and she turns around in her chair and she's yours," Gething says. "You don't get the feeling that you're wasting her time."

Means remembers being astounded at how Freeman seemed to recognize almost all of the graduate students by name and face, even if she had only met a person once or twice.

"It was just amazing," he says. "It really endeared her to the students."

But when Freeman came to UT Southwestern in August 1975, she did so because she thought the job would be less time-consuming than the YWCA, where she had risen after 10 years to a role as consultant to the national board of directors.

"I had a very good offer from the YWCA, but I took a cut in salary and came here because I felt that this job would allow me to work Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and even allowed the flexibility to leave early if my kid were sick," she remembers. "I knew that the YWCA was the kind of job that entails evenings and weekends and meetings with boards and volunteers."

She laughs now, admitting that her UT Southwestern job has turned out equally demanding time-wise.

In a career that has progressed through numerous administrative levels, Freeman has worked not only evenings and weekends, but also a number of holidays. "I have never worked on Christmas Day," she says, "but I have worked New Year's Eve to meet a deadline.

"But this is not unique. On any given weekend or holiday, I have usually found someone else doing the very same thing. When you want to do really well, you put forth the effort."

Then, as now, the people justify the effort, Freeman says. "People appreciate what you do. They say, 'You did a good job. Thank you very much.' We're partners in every effort and equally appreciative of each other."

And when Freeman explains why she decided to move into a new role, she speaks of her love of the institution.

"I've been here for a very long time, and Dr. Wildenthal used to be my boss when he was dean of the graduate school. Dr. Neaves used to be my boss when he was dean of the graduate school. They're both in other positions now, but they represent to me the kind of high ideals and high standards that we're all striving for in the institution," she says. "Even though I could be a part of those high ideals and high standards and a part of the 'train' that's moving towards those goals in the graduate school, I really feel that I can make a more significant contribution in this new role."

UT Southwestern's Rock of Gibraltar sounds as inspiring as ever.

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Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical Center, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.