

U-M's selection of Coleman case study in search process

Last week, the board of regents picked Mary Sue Coleman to be the 13th (and first woman) president of the University of Michigan. A nationally ranked biochemist and cancer researcher, Dr. Coleman had been president of the University of Iowa.

The story of the search is instructive. The regents appointed a 16-member advisory committee, chaired by Graduate School Dean Earl Lewis, which included faculty, staff, students and alumni. Working confidentially, the committee winnowed a list of around 200 names down to less than 10, many already sitting presidents of other universities. This list was presented to the regents, who met behind closed doors with their advisors.

The regents then made their own background checks, privately calling around to get the skinny on the various candidates. Still working in secret, the regents interviewed Dr. Coleman twice. They consulted among themselves about Dr. Coleman's credentials and record in office, evaluating it against the needs of the University of Michigan. A subcommittee finally flew to Iowa City, where they unanimously offered her the job. She accepted immediately and was warmly greeted by the university community.

Sounds like the search proceeded in a sane, sensible and effective way.

It was not always thus. I served on the board of regents during the searches that resulted in the appointments as president of James Duderstadt and Lee Bollinger. During both searches, the regents were sued by various newspapers for alleged violations of the Michigan Open Meetings Act, which appeared to require that whatever the regents did in picking a new president be done in public.

The last time around, an Ann Arbor judge even ordered regents not to make telephone calls to check out candidates, not to consult in private with the advisory committee or each other, not to interview various candidates.

Because the court ordered both searches to proceed in public, no not one — sitting president was willing to let their name go forward on the short list. Presidents I talked with during both searches told me they would be thrilled to be considered for the U-M presidency, one of the prime jobs in higher education. But they all said they would decline to let their name go forward for fear of creating troubles with their present universities.

Hiamstrung from carrying out their constitu-

tional responsibility to find the best possible president for the U-M, the regents both times picked insiders with whom they had direct familiarity. Duderstadt was the sitting provost of the university, while Bollinger had been the long-time dean of the law school.

Many worried that if the courts continued to interpret the Open Meetings Act strictly, public universities in Michigan would be systematically disadvantaged in competing with private universities for high quality talent to run the show. Eventually, in 1999, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that the Open Meetings Act did not apply to university boards making presidential searches. Since then, both Eastern Michigan University and the U-M have chosen new presidents essentially in secret.

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grousing about the court's decision. They continue to argue that the public has a "right" to inspect all details of presidential searches and that if university boards can't identify and recruit good candidates under those conditions it's their own fault.

Dr. Coleman, for one, offers evidence to the contrary. Immediately after her selection was announced, she said that she would have not allowed her name to be considered for the job if the search had been in public. Regent David Brandon told me that the U-M search "will be a case study about how to do a good search process. We picked a great president. We had available a large talent pool of sitting presidents. We protected the integrity of our university and the confidentiality of those who were interested."

It seems to me the evidence is conclusive. The Supreme Court made the right choice back in 1999. Public universities in Michigan — not to mention kids, families, alumni and the entire state — are better off now that boards can carry out sane, sensible and effective searches for leadership talent.

Phil Power is the Chairman of the Board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953.2206 or at ppower@hmcfile: phpcol-615-president searches>> mecomm.net.



Sue Mason

Books provided girls with the inspiration to think outside box

I'm in mourning. A woman I never knew, but whose words fueled the imagination of a 10-year-old, died last week.

Mildred Wirt Benson's passing was duly noted in obituaries around the world. Tributes flooded into an Internet Web site devoted to her.

Long before Gloria Steinem and the women's liberation movement, Benson was inspiring girls to think outside the box as the author of 23 of the original Nancy Drew mystery stories. The teen-aged sleuth and her pals Bess Marvin and George Fayne (for the uneducated, George was a girl, too) solved one mystery after another, beginning in the 1930s.

George was the tom boy. "It was her desire to be as boyish looking as she could, and carried out her name as much as she dared." (*The Message in the Hollow Oak*)

Bess, George's cousin, was "pretty, lady-like and sedate. She took pride in her person and gave particular care to her luxurious locks." (*The Message in the Hollow Oak*)

Nancy ... well ... she had everything right. In Benson's own words, she was "good looking and enjoyed great personal freedom. She never lost an athletic contest and was far smarter than adults with whom she associated." And her leisure time "was spent living dangerously."

"She avoided all household tasks," Benson wrote in her essay, *The Ghost of Ladora* (she was from Ladora, Iowa), "and indeed, might rate as a pioneer of Women's Lib."

For me, Nancy was everything I wanted to be. Athletic ... I never caught a baseball in my under-age-12 years which meant I never made it out of the outfield during neighborhood scrub baseball games. I was destined to shag fly balls in perpetuum for the older kids.

Smarter than adults ... I thought I was pretty clever changing a C to a B on my report card in first grade, but my parents spotted it right away. Could it have been the fact that I used a pencil?

Living dangerously ... Does getting stuck with Orville Miller in a recently excavated basement in a new subdivision count? The danger was dodging the spanking and only getting grounded for a week.

Avoided all household tasks ... Nope. Had to wait until I was an adult and hire a cleaning lady to beat that rap.

Great personal freedom ... Don't think so. And let's face it. In this day and age, even as a prominent attorney, Carson Drew probably would be brought up on child endangerment charges for allowing an underage minor to roam the streets.

Benson was a ghostwriter for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Its founder and owner, Edward Stratemeyer came up with the idea for the Nancy

Drew series and provided Benson with the story line. Benson, as author Carolyn Keene, fleshed out plot and characters.

Stratemeyer was "bitterly disappointed" with her first manuscript. He thought Nancy was too flip and that the book wouldn't be well-received.

But what did he know ... he's a guy. The first three books were immediate successes and over a 38-year period, the series was printed in 17 languages and had sales of more than 30 million copies.

I spent many a hot summer afternoon with my friends, savoring every word Benson had written. River Heights was my neighborhood. Bess and George were my friends. At age 10, I couldn't live the life of Nancy Drew, but I could dream. Nancy Drew became the print version of a dream I had and all my friends had. We wanted to drive a little roadster like hers and explore new worlds.

I've never gotten my roadster — my dream car was a Mercedes 280 SL two-seater I happened to see from a DSR bus window on the way to Wayne State — but I did explore new worlds — the grand tour of Europe on less than \$5 a day — average.

My friends and I tried to emulate Benson by writing our own stories. I credit her with my love of reading — mysteries, of course, and a good Tom Clancy thriller — and my love of writing. Having attended four different schools in seven years (including three high schools, and no, my father wasn't in the military), writing became the way I overcame my shyness.

I also credit Benson with my collection of vintage Nancy Drew books. It's a mixed bag. About half are the original versions, while the remainder are the 1960s versions I read. I bought them with the idea of rereading them, but never did.

My interest in them was picked last month when I read the first three of the Harry Potter books. I was struck by how much they reminded me of my Nancy Drew mysteries. I'm gathering up the Potter books for my 7-year-old who'd rather be playing than reading in hopes they will one day kindle a love of reading.

My Nancy Drew books, on the other hand, are for my avid kindergarten reader. I don't think she'll need them to be encouraged to think outside the box. At age 5, she's already flattened the box and is on her way to making her own version.

Benson's passing, now is a good time to revisit my childhood pleasures. It would be a fitting tribute to a woman who had such a profound influence on so many girls. And maybe some woman will come along and create a Pulitzer Prize for inspiration and give it to Benson. She surely deserves it.

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