

BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH
PAIGE STEPHENSON, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF UNITED WAY OF THE PIEDMONT



Paige Stephenson, (left) with Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D.
Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris speaks with Paige Stephenson, president and chief executive officer of the United Way of the Piedmont. (This interview has been edited for content, clarity, and length.)

Harris: I'd like to start at the beginning. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up, what your upbringing was like, why you moved to Spartanburg in 1993, and what drew you to your career?

Stephenson: So I grew up in Monroe County, Alabama. The claim to fame for that county is that it's the birthplace and home of the now-late Harper Lee, author of "To Kill a Mockingbird." I grew up in a very rural area of that county. My closest neighbors were family members, and they were a mile away. My dad was a farmer. My mom was a schoolteacher. I had the idyllic country upbringing, with lots of outdoor activities and animals. I loved to read and spent a lot of time in books.

From high school and into college, volunteerism was a real key piece for me, and I said that when I went off to the University of Alabama I would stay engaged in that arena. That's where I met my husband. He was working on his Ph.D. in chemistry, and when he finished up, his job offer was here in Spartanburg, and the rest is sort of history.

Harris: Tell me more about your interest in public service.

Stephenson: Even though we were far, far away from the action, my parents were both very involved in things outside of our community, with boards and civic clubs and those types of things. So that was just

modeled for me from a very early age. When I got to Spartanburg, I had the opportunity very early on to participate in Leadership Spartanburg, and that really helped me get connected in the community and start my volunteerism here.

Harris: What was your initial reaction when you were offered the position of president and CEO of United Way of the Piedmont? After nearly 15 years with United Way, what does it mean to you to now lead the organization?

Stephenson: While I was very honored to have been selected, my pathway into that position was not your usual pathway. I had actually applied for the job when one of my former colleagues was exiting in June of 2014. I was unsuccessful, but that was really quite the blessing because I was able to observe what (my predecessor) was doing and see how he was making decisions. I could really think through what he was doing and think about whether I agreed.

So when he exited in November of 2015, an interim was brought in and they did not reopen the search. They just did a search process on me. They had watched how I had handled the prior 14 months. Then they came to me.

Harris: What are some specific initiatives or campaigns you're excited to launch or expand?

Stephenson: One of the things that we launched earlier this year with our partners is "A Place to Call Home." United Way had been convening work around homelessness and housing for quite some time, and we are really looking forward to continuing to build on that work.

Another area that I'm really excited about is with Union Coun-



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ty. Because of the work with Spartanburg Academic Movement here in Spartanburg County, that attracted The BlackRock Foundation to make an investment in Union County. And so as part of that two-year planning process for Union Uplifted, we've had a team member who's been boots-on-the-ground to help build those relationships. I'm excited to see where that leads.

Harris: United Way of the Piedmont covers three different counties. How do you approach that, when the needs and demands may be different for different communities?

Stephenson: The three counties we cover have very distinct personalities, different resources, and different players. But one of the great things is that we're able to take what we've learned from one community and do a little research and development and deploy it elsewhere so that it fits. We get a little bit of a blueprint to take in and to tweak and see what's going to make the best sense for that particular community.

There's also a lot of collaboration among nonprofits and organizations and the community here in Spartanburg County.

Harris: You've built many strong relationships within the organization and the community. How do you plan to deepen and leverage those relationships to further United Way's mission?

Stephenson: Relationship-building is definitely key. But it's not like we say, "Well, we built that relationship and now we're done. We can move on to the next one." It's a continued conversation with people — listening to what they have happening, what their particular needs are. And when I'm talking about that, it's not just from an individual perspective. It's looking at things from the organizational level and being able to fill gaps with one another.

So when I think about the work we have going on right now, we've got another new collaborative that will be launching around mental and behavioral health, and I'm super-excited about that. That's going to have a tremendous impact in our community.

Whenever we've had external organizations and people who have looked at what we're trying to accomplish here in Spartanburg, they have been so encouraging and complimentary. They say, "We've seen one community that has done this piece well, but we've never seen a community look at this in a comprehensive fashion and how it is all interconnected."

Harris: The business community is very involved with your organization. How can others get involved, and do that in ways that go beyond financial support?

Stephenson: One of the great programs that we have is VITA, which stands for

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance. You don't have to be a numbers person. We have several folks who were English and history majors who became tax preparers for us. They go through training. If you don't want to do that, there are other jobs that need to be done. For example, we need volunteers to welcome people as they're coming in to the clinic for their tax appointments.

This particular program is targeting households with incomes of \$60,000 and below. Many of the families we are working with are elderly, or they're on a very, very fixed income.

They have maybe \$30,000 in total household income. So when you begin to stop and think about what that means for them, just from a tax-preparation cost savings, that's saving them an average of \$200 to \$250 a year for that.

We also coordinate other volunteer projects across our community.

Harris: So let's talk about leadership. What leadership qualities do you think are important in a leader of a nonprofit, or any organization?

Stephenson: I think that resiliency and adaptability are important across the board. I also think that transparency is key, because if you want to retain good employees or create good ones, they need to be able to see what's happening in the organization.

You also need to be able to build relationships and know your team members, and be authentic in those relationships.

It's the typical mantra of, "If I'm the smartest person in the room, I'm in the wrong room." I want to bring people on to the team who have different skill sets and who are stronger in areas where I'm not as strong. When you're looking at your leadership team, it shouldn't be a ton of people who look exactly the same and think exactly the same.

You need different life experiences and professional experiences. I just think it makes for richer conversation and discussion.

Harris: I'd next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don't know what's going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what's at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.

Stephenson: I think that being very open and honest is really important. I think it's important for me to talk about the times I've screwed things up and what I've learned from that and how I proceeded. I think the team needs to know that no one is perfect. Mistakes are going to be made. The thing that we have to do is to talk about them, learn from them, and create the next steps so we don't repeat the mistakes.

You need to have some vulnerability. And you need to be forthright to help everyone understand what's going on.

I always ask whether there is something that needs to be said, or maybe something I've done that has created some separation. And I ask whether there is something I need to be aware of, and I really put it back on myself.

The customer isn't always right because they're a human being. But there are times when it doesn't matter who's right and who's wrong. You just step back and decide where you want to go with this, and whether you need to apologize and try a non-traditional pathway to make sure this relationship moves forward in a positive fashion.

Harris: So tell me, do you have a hero? Who have been your influences in your leadership journey?

Stephenson: This month I celebrate 24 years with the United Way. So I would say Kathy Dunleavy, who came in as CEO a year and a half after I joined. Her determination, her perseverance, her relentless focus on things — that really set a tone for me and helped guide me, and she's still somebody I go to as a sounding board.

The second person would be Mary Helen Wade. She was on our board at the United Way before I moved into the CEO role. She was on the search committee the first time around, when I did not get selected, and then she chaired the search committee when I was selected, and her mentorship and belief in what I could do was very inspiring.

And then I would say Lori McMillan, who's with Spartanburg Regional. She's over professional services, and she was my first female board chair, and it was during Covid. So her calm response to things and her insights from a health care perspective were really important. During that time, there were questions about where things were going and what we should be doing, and she helped with that.

Harris: And do you have a hero?

Stephenson: I really do not have one singular person. There are bits and pieces at different points in my life where I feel like someone has been an extremely strong influence, but there's nobody I would say that I've put up on a pedestal, that I look up to in all situations because we are all flawed.

Harris: Do you have a mantra or a motto?

Stephenson: Whenever I think about leadership, I think about being empathetic and authentic. That has served me well. Leading a nonprofit organization that is centered on people, I think coming into that with empathy is critically important. When this work becomes numbers and not people, then it's time to leave.