

Interview with Laura Gammons
Administrative Coordinator at Wake Forest University
By Ryan Lloyd

RL: Would you like me to start the first one?

LG: Yes...what format do you want?

RL: Tell me a little bit about your background and where you grew up.

LG: I grew up at Pilot Mountain, so I'm a local girl [from] about twenty-five minutes or a half hour away from Winston-Salem. Local farm girl, started handling tobacco leaves when I was three years old and as I got a little older and stronger I could lift the sticks and put them in the barn or pass it up from the bottom two tier poled and house the tobacco once my legs were long enough so I could straddle the tier poles; I also primed the tobacco, which is picking the leaves off the stalks. Later on, my family could afford a tobacco stringer and the process of tying the tobacco leaves onto the sticks was automated.

RL: Ok.

LG: So I'm a farm girl. Cows, pigs, horses, dogs, cats, whatever.

RL: Tell me a little bit about your family growing up.

LG: Both my parents and my uncle were teachers. So, we would go to school during the fall and spring semesters and come home and we might be in the field until dark and then in the summer we'd be in the field from about 5:30 in the morning until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning the next day, depending on how long it took us to get the tobacco in. And then in the fall we'd come home in the evenings and we'd of course finish up priming or take down a barn of tobacco that had cured. We'd take the leaves off the sticks, pack it in the sacks, and load it off to the market. In the spring, we'd have to come home and fix the plant beds or set (i.e. plant) the tobacco out in the fields. And then there's topping (breaking off the suckers at the top of the stalk) and pegging (walking behind the setter and hand digging the hole and planting by hand); not that you (the majority of today's generation) would understand any of that but that is how I grew up.

So, then it was also a trip being a daughter of teachers in the school because then other students think, "Oh, you're privileged and you get to know what's on the exam." On the contrary, they made it tougher on you, they expected more from you, and my mom intentionally didn't write her exams until the hour before class so that they couldn't say, "Well, I know". So, the level of expectations was a lot higher. I had my dad in seventh grade, and he taught 7a and 8a. So I had him in 7a and the fifth grade too, and he was the only instructor to give me a D.

RL: Your dad?

LG: My dad. And then I when was supposed to be in 8a because they gave placement tests to see where you ranked, he demoted me to 8b because he did not want me in his class again. Then I had my mom in high school; she taught college parallel classes. She was the senior English teacher, assistant principal, and varsity cheerleader sponsor; so it was quite interesting actually.

RL: I was going to ask how your childhood shaped what you do now.

LG: Well, when I was really young, my mom worked for an insurance company, and did that while she put my dad through college because I was very little. So when I would get sick or she couldn't leave me with my grandmother or the babysitter she would take me to work with her and I had to sit on the couch and be really quiet but I'd see her filing and typing and even from a young age, I'd go back home and my brother, who is about two and a half years younger than me...I would find myself teaching him by writing on the walls (pretending it was a blackboard) or the fireplace mantle. And then I'd sit and pretend like I was typing and filing. So it was interesting to see that I ended up in something similar--and in education--because I'd swore I'd never be a teacher but I still find myself in the academic environment so that was pretty interesting on how that developed.

RL: What did you want to be when you were young, when you were growing up?

LG: I wanted to be a secretary, but when I was in high school I took college parallel classes of course and then I had a tendency to favor my accounting classes so when I went to college I ended up taking and majoring in accounting and business management. So that kind of fits running the office and doing the budgetary portion of my job; it all tied in together quite nice, actually.

RL: Please tell me about the work that you do now. I want to understand it a little better.

LG: Well, I could give you a printout of my job requirements if you want but in an overview, I proctor classes on occasion which is nothing more than sitting in for an exam or starting a DVD (called them film strips back in my younger years), taking rosters, that kind of thing. I keep the budget (and this department's a little bit different because we have three other funds, multimillion dollar funds) so I keep track of our one and half million dollar department budget but I also keep track of these multimillion dollar funds, where people have donated money and they are very restricted so we can use them only for certain things. Therefore, my accounting degree comes in real handy[sic]. I keep track of the supplies that we need, like the blue books that we need to order. I also order desk copies for instructors and help with course registration for our majors and minors. Not necessarily advising them, although I was a minor advisor when I was in the economics department but here I do not have to advise anyone.

RL: I'm a history minor actually.

LG: Ok, great.

RL: I get your emails.

LG: Exactly, and let's see...what else do I do? Proofing documents, setting up receptions or events and making sure everything goes smoothly there. Requesting degree audits to see who is going to be eligible for our phi theta honors society and getting invitations letters sent out to them; if we have job candidates coming in or guest speakers visiting, I am in charge of getting them reimbursed for their travel expenses, assisting them with hotels; anything and everything.

RL: That's a lot.

LG: It's multifaceted so I don't get bored with one task constantly.

RL: Did you have previous experience or training in this kind of work? How did you get in to this occupation?

LG: Let's see. Right out of high school, I took a summer job at Wachovia Bank and I was an accountant there in Trust Accounting doing input data processing basically. And in the fall--no I take that back--I got out of high school, and I took that summer off. I went to college for a year. Then in the summer I took a job at Wachovia, and then I got engaged, and didn't make it back to college. Got married the next spring, and was married a couple of years and had a kid; divorced; single mom with a two year old. Then I went back to school at night and worked full time while I was a single mom...built a house two years later and graduated college. I was independent for eight years and finally got brave enough to remarry; I was married about five years then went through about the same thing. My child was about six. Separated, then divorced. Five years later, I got brave enough to try it again. Third marriage has succeeded and I'm very happy. I forgot what the question was.

RL: Do you have any previous training..?

LG: Oh. Well so I was at Wachovia Bank as a trust accountant and then left there. I went to US Air and was in the consumer affairs department, so I was assisting with the telephone reps and the letter reps of those customers who were complaining and issuing compensation because they were upset so they would come back and fly with us again. During that time, I was promoted to working for the Vice President in that department as her secretary. I got really good at booking travel. So that comes in handy when I'm booking travel for speakers and others. Then the banking at Wachovia comes in handy doing budget stuff. Growing up with my parents being teachers and seeing how they graded papers, prepared for classes, etc...I was already initiated in the academic environment anyway.

RL: That's a lot of previous experience.

LG: Yeah

RL: What do you think is important to making the university function and work, and do you think about this while you do your work?

LG: I do actually. I've always considered myself on the front lines because when people call in or they come in to visit, I'm the first person of contact usually. I've always strived to be professional and helpful so that they get a good feeling and feel safe enough and confident enough in the university to bring people to visit and ultimately allow their children, our students, to come here. In any job I've ever had, I have always been the first line of defense and the first person people meet and greet. [While] talking to them on the phone and setting up appointments, I've always put forth that level of effort to give a good impression of the university, of myself and our department. It's not just me but they look at me as an overall view of how the university is.

RL: What are the favorite things about your job that you like most?

LG: I have great faculty [to work with], and I'm not just saying that but I've worked in several departments here at the university. I started out in the IS Department as a temporary person for a year and was then hired to work in the Advancement office. Well, I was organizing events for the Board of Visitors meetings and coordinating the graduates when they come back for homecoming...also all the homecoming events and working with the MBA school...so that was one job I had. Then, I left there and I was split between American Ethnic Studies and Human Resources. I later took a full time position in the Economics Department and worked there for five years. Then, I left the Economics department and went to WFU Baptist Hospital, and worked in the Health Sciences Department for a year where I wrote budgets for submission for grant applications for the doctors trying to get grant money. I didn't much care for that so I came back to the academic side of WFU and have been in History ever since; going on six years now.

RL: Wow.

LG: Sorry, I forgot what the question was and rambled again.

RL: Oh, your favorite thing [about your job]...

LG: Oh, so I liked working in the different departments which now allows me the knowledge of knowing who to contact on campus when a situation arises, because I know basically everybody on campus and which department they're in. I love the students coming in and meeting and talking to them and being able to help. I also enjoy all the speakers that come in with their diverse topics and getting to meet them and hear them lecture on occasion. I don't have time to do that very often; however, I get to read what their topics are. Then, setting up the Phi Theta awards banquet, I like doing that and then

actually going and seeing the students get their degrees. It's just really nice, and my faculty is the best of all the departments, seriously. Economics and history, they are running in a close tie, but I've been in History and everyone is so wonderful here and they've been really good to me. They're my extended family. It's not just a job for me. It's an extended family for me. So I'm really fortunate. I've worked in some horrendous places before, just god-awful – horrible—places, where I was just dreading to go to work.

RL: What advice would you give for people wanting to go into this kind of work?

LG: It is a really good job; it is very fulfilling. I'd say if you're in it for the money, don't do it. But, I don't know...it just depends on what your passion is, I guess. I would say regardless of what job or what field you go into, be passionate about it because you're going to be doing it for a long time and if you're not happy in it and it's not what you really want to do, you're going to hate your job. I've been there and done that, and I know from experience you're going to dread going in and it's going to feel like a waste because you're not fulfilling what you're meant to do. So, follow your passion, seriously.

RL: How long have you been here and how did you get to Wake Forest? I know we covered this a little bit.

LG: Yeah, a little bit. Well, I've been here since '98, so about twelve years roughly. In a roundabout way, I've always lived in Pilot Mountain and I've always worked in Winston-Salem and I've always targeted the larger companies: RJ Reynolds, (I worked there by the way...I forgot to mention it), in the international department. Wachovia, US Air, Wake Forest. Those were my target companies.

RL: You got them all.

LG: I had the opportunity to work for them all. I've always been fortunate. Every job I've ever applied for, I've always gotten. I'll tell you a little history about me. When I was in high school and I was dating my first husband--and we dated for five years--he and his family were Wake Forest fans...diehards. Well, I had never been to a Wake Forest ballgame, never been to any college game, so that is when I received my passion for Wake. We were dating and his family always bought season tickets so I went with them to the Wake basketball games. They got me season tickets too after that first year so I could go with them. From that point on I've always loved Wake Forest and then to be able to work here, that was just awesome. So, I've been very happy and very blessed to be here.

RL: Yes ma'am.

LG: And it's Laura...you don't have call me ma'am.

RL: What do you like most about working at Wake?

LG: The absolute most - the people.

RL: The people.

LG: The environment. I've been in workplaces where you punch clock and you can't get up from your desk unless somebody's sitting there covering for you and then the environment is kind of backbiting, snippy, and competitive. I like the academic environment much better than the corporate world. I've also dealt with the condescending attitude of the male ego and those good ole boy societies.

RL: Mhm.

LG: When I worked at Pilot Freight Carriers, for instance, or Long Communications or John S. Clark Construction – those were major 'good 'ole boys'.

RL: How many jobs have you had?

LG: Long Communications, when I was married to my first husband, and that was a temporary job because I was working part-time. I forgot to mention my bank teller experience at First Citizens. I was a peak time teller two days a week after I had my first child. I could make more money working those two days without taking insurance than I could make working a full-time job plus I could be home five days with my child. So that worked out really well. During my initial divorce/separation period for a year I was going to school at night and working through a temporary service during the day so they placed me in several different jobs. And that's how I found out I didn't want to do.

RL: (laughs)

LG: I don't think I answered your question.

RL: Oh yes, you said the people.

LG: Oh yes, the people; so the people here and the environment are wonderful. I wouldn't trade it. I've told them--I've said, "I know what it's like on the outside, and I am completely happy and unless y'all get rid of me I will be here."

RL: Where do you think you will be in ten to fifteen years?

LG: Right here at Wake until I retire. But I'll tell you this: we've had, between me and my husband, five daughters. Four have graduated college now, and I have one that's a junior in high school, my youngest, Alex. My oldest daughter, Meredith, is about twenty-five now and she's the mother of my first granddaughter who will be one year old on March 13. So we've gotten tuition concession; all of my daughters so far have had the opportunity to go to college. They went to NC State and majored in various things; so Wake Forest takes care of their employees. They give you the option of coming to school here if you're an employee after you've been here for three years. They give you tuition concession for your children, wonderful health plan, dental, vision plans. I've been in

other places where it wasn't pleasant, and then [there's also] just the atmosphere and the caring nature of the faculty. It is just really a tight-bonded group, like a family. It's not like it is in the corporate world where you've got to climb tooth and nail to get to the top.

RL: Pull people down?

LG: Exactly. They do, they cut you down and backstab you to get ahead regardless, you know. But that's what I like best about Wake is the people and the environment.

RL: Do you have a family of your own? I know we covered this. What is the hope for your children?

LG: Well, I know that they got into the majors that they wanted. Cassandra graduated in textile design and she wants to design clothes--she's actually working for a company doing that. Vanessa always wanted to be a doctor. She graduated from Elon with a biology or chemistry major and religion major because she wanted to do medical missions. She went on the mission field for two or three years and now she's in PA school at Wingate. Victoria earned her degree in biology and she wanted to be a pediatrician or something. Not sure if that has changed, but she's working at Baptist Hospital doing something. Those are my three stepdaughters. My oldest daughter Meredith got her degree in Social Work. Not that she's using that now because she's a stay at home mom now...that suits her because she is a really caring and nurturing person. She started out in environmental engineering major and after a year or two she decided that wasn't what she wanted so she switched majors. So not sure what she'll do with it once her baby gets a little older.

Then we have Alex, my youngest. She is a junior in high school and just turned seventeen on February 2nd. I don't know what she'll end up doing. She's always wanted to teach kindergarten to third grade kids. When she was little, she had four sets of tubes in her ears so it created scar tissue and she couldn't hear and learn like other students. We ended up taking her to Sylvan Learning Center for a year or two to catch her up. Then by the time she was in middle school, she was tutoring other kids, helping them catch up on the reading and now she's going to be graduating on the Honor Roll a semester early in high school next December, which is killing me because she is my baby. She is planning on going to Surry Community and then transferring to get her degree to teach kindergarten through third grade so all our children are in the field that they wanted to be in. That is my wish for them: that they will be as happy and fulfilled as I am.

RL: That's wonderful. Do you have any special hobbies and interests outside of work?

LG: I do. My husband and I ride a Harley Road King. Let me tell you, when we went to the beach two years ago, just riding, we didn't expect to trade because we had a low rider only for about a year which I bought to surprise Dean for his 50th birthday. When we got there and we were just chilling out and looking at the bikes, we both were at opposite ends of this tent, and ended up at the same time at the back at this one bike. We looked at each other. We traded and two or three hours later, we were driving off with our new Harley Road King Classic. We have an exciting road trip the end of June; we are

taking a two week road trip, going out to Mt Rushmore, the Black Hills, Sturgis and Yellowstone.

RL: I've always wanted to go to Yellowstone.

LG: We were going to do that trip this year but never got around to it. The previous summer, we went to the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam and Vegas. So we're taking these road trips and love them! That's one of our hobbies. I like renovating. I like demolition and building stuff and renovating the house and yard work, so I'm Dean's little "mud pie girl" because I like to get dirty, just tear stuff up, rebuild it, and am currently working on block retaining walls; I love hands-on kind of projects. We also lead the Early Morning Praise and Worship Service at our church, so singing and playing music and going out and helping people is our passion.

RL: What is your favorite kind of music?

LG: I'm torn. We sang in a bluegrass group--Christian bluegrass--so that's one. But Hazel died a year and a half ago so we haven't sung bluegrass since. We're a contemporary Christian group so we listen to 94.1. Some of my favorite groups are: Toby Mac, Casting Crowns, Third Day, Phillips Craig and Dean, etc. We do a lot of their songs. We started Early Contemporary Service a little over a year ago and it's grown surprisingly fast. We've probably have about a 50-75 members now at the early service, and there's an estimated two to three hundred in the other service, but it has grown the church so much, and we plan on taking our youth group, which has around seventy-something teens, to the Winter Jam Concert. That's [Those are] our three big hobbies. And spending time with our children and our granddaughter when we can, which is not often enough.

RL: Is that her right there in the picture on your wall?

LG: Yes, that was at her christening; the other is the day she was born. I don't have a current picture up but she has got this wonderful spiked hair. She's such a little punkster. I love her -- love her to death. She's walking around now.

RL: Do you think about the idea of the American Dream and if so, what does it mean to you?

LG: It's not the traditional American Dream. And I'll tell you why. My current husband was like me; he wanted and had the big house with the nice job, the whole package. But that didn't make him happy because she [his ex wife] wasn't a wife to him. It was all materialistic.

RL: I'm sure it's beautiful on Pilot Mountain.

LG: Pilot Mountain is on our front yard.

RL: Wow.

LG: I mean it's right there. And we're in the middle of a hundred and fifty acre farm and we've all got our health. We're involved in our church, in our praise music. We ride our Harley, you know. That's our American Dream. We don't lack for anything we want. If we want it, we go get it. My life was on a smaller scale than his - been through two divorces so I didn't have that extravagant lifestyle, but I had a comfortable style but he says that he is happier now with the smaller house, etc. and doing stuff. The bigger you have it and the more you have, the more upkeep and maintenance your time goes toward keeping it up and fixing it rather than enjoying it. And then there is the stress of the job and always being on the job versus a lower key - working for someone else. You still get the money but you don't have all the stress of keeping it up because he had his own computer business and his own real estate business so it's different because you don't have the stress of owning the company.

You can just work and do your job and then come home and do your thing. So, it depends. Our American dream is different. Our goals now are to get enough money to be able to retire, keep our home, and get a camper. One of the house campers and travel with our Harley in tow and go and see the world. That's our American Dream, so it changes in the different age groups. You are what your goals are, I guess. When we were younger it was, "Oh let's get a job, oh let's get a house, oh let's have kids, oh let's do whatever" and now it's more along the lines of, "Oh let's retire, let's enjoy our kids, let's just enjoy life." So, it just varies depending on what you want and where you are in your stage of life.

RL: Do you think over the course of history, our culture has made the American Dream out to be more materialistic than it was--say from like 1776?

LG: Definitely, because when I was growing up, we grew our own food, raised our own pigs and cows - milked the cows, fed the chickens, slaughtered the livestock and fixed your meat, grew your garden. Growing up with my family and working like we did, we would hear my great grandparents talk about their past. I was fortunate enough to have five generations on both sides of my family, so I had my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents until I was in my twenties on both sides of my family. When I was born I had a great great-grandmother that was one hundred and three. My great great-grandma lived to be a hundred and a two. And my great-grandpa lived to be ninety. Then on the other side, he was in his nineties. My grandmother got Alzheimer's so she died in her seventies or eighties, but I've still got all my family. So hearing the stories of them going through the Great Depression and knowing how they saved...you didn't get something unless you actually had the money and the cash to buy it right then. And to see my grandparents live like that--my grandpa would save. He could pay cash for his truck and drive it home. Seeing that and then seeing people running up credit card debts like my second ex-husband did...I didn't do that. I was more on the side of, "You save and you buy it, and you stay and live within your means, and you don't have the stress and the fights in your family because of the money issues".

Then I married my second husband, who had run up credit card debt which I wasn't accustomed to. I had one gas card and I paid it off every month. I had my house payment, I tithed to my church, you know, that kind of thing. So when we got married, the next week after we got back from our honeymoon, I was having creditors call me. I was going to lose my house that I got before we got married.

RL: Oh geez.

LG: So I took his cards. I went to my bank. I consolidated them. I gave him an allowance and I took over the money and in five years I had him out of debt. And we were divorced after that and we still get along, we just couldn't live together. We weren't made for each other. And this is Alex's dad. Then my current husband has the same mentality that I have. We have a gas card, we have a Discovery card for when we travel and we pay it off every month so there is no interest, there's no debt, no fighting, and if we want something, we plan it. We pay for it or we set aside savings and we use the system. I'm lecturing you on finances, I'm sorry. But we use the system. So if they have zero interest for a year, then we get it under that zero interest so we're not taking our savings out and we pay it off a month early. We pay it out in eleven months instead of twelve so we know there's no chance of it going in to that gray zone where they can tack on that interest. So we use the system and it works out really good.

RL: Thank you very much.

LG: You're welcome.