

Intellectual Curiosity and the Well-Trained Mind



PROBLEM-SOLVING AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS LEARNED AT NORTHWESTERN HAVE POWERED UNION PACIFIC'S **RHONDA S. FERGUSON** ('91) TO CAREER HEIGHTS PREVIOUSLY UNIMAGINED.

For Rhonda S. Ferguson, her position as executive vice president and chief legal officer at Union Pacific Railroad provides a rare opportunity to serve in a historic company that remains an integral part of the American economy today.

Connecting 23 western states by rail, Union Pacific provides a critical link in the global supply chain. "Everything goes through our logistics channel, whether it's housing, automobiles, chemicals, industrial products, or food," Ferguson says. "The work done by the men and women of Union Pacific directly impacts every industry in the United States."

Ferguson joined the \$20 billion enterprise in 2016 after an executive recruiter approached her about a position at the company's Omaha, Nebraska, headquarters. She initially dismissed the idea of leaving her hometown of Cleveland, where she had built a 20-year career in litigation and corporate law. Nonetheless, she discussed it with her husband, and they decided it couldn't hurt to hear more about the company.

Ferguson met the Union Pacific team in Omaha and immediately fell in love with the company's family-like culture. "Never say never," she laughs. "It's the best job I've ever had, and I've had a lot of wonderful opportunities. It's the culmination of everything I've done that has prepared me for this role, at this company, at this time in my life."

Prior to joining Union Pacific, Ferguson served nearly a decade as vice president, corporate secretary, and chief ethics officer at

FirstEnergy, where she learned important leadership skills. "I was responsible for several large teams, which was challenging but very rewarding," she says. "It was a sweet spot for me."

Earlier in her career, she served as assistant general counsel and assistant corporate secretary at Ferro Corporation, and before entering corporate law, she was a partner at BakerHostetler LLP and a litigation associate at Thompson Hine LLP. She earned her juris doctor degree from Case Western Reserve University.

Throughout her career, Ferguson has used the industrial engineering approach to problem-solving that she honed at Northwestern. A committed lifelong learner, Ferguson says, "Engineering pushes you to think critically. That intellectual curiosity drives you to find creative and innovative ways to do things that you never imagined you would do."

She remembers her time at Northwestern fondly and stays in touch. In 2016, she participated in a panel discussion hosted on campus by the National Society of Black Engineers, an organization that has served as a vital support network for her. The first in her family to graduate from college, Ferguson's experience and success helped persuade her sister Rita Beckford ('94) and daughter Kristen Ferguson ('20) to pursue Northwestern Engineering degrees.

"I attribute the vast majority of my career success to the education and strong foundation I acquired at Northwestern," she says. "The University opened doors and allowed me to have a career beyond my wildest imagination."

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