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Success in the Lives of Women Rhodes Scholars: How to Have Your Cake and Eat it Too

Georgina Calvert-Lee

The Rhodes Scholarship is a pre-eminent academic award. More, it is the mark of a future leader. Much is expected of a Rhodes Scholar. The feats and fame of past recipients loom large in the public consciousness. Who has not heard of former U.S. President Bill Clinton, or of Wesley Clark, NATO's former Supreme Allied Commander (Europe)? The list of notable alumni goes on, including forthright thinkers from a whole range of fields. Leaders of thought — writers, academics, teachers — take their place beside leaders of progress — scientists and researchers — and leaders in public office — politicians, appellate judges, university presidents. One aspect of these lists is striking, however — women are under-represented. Although the odd female Rhodes Scholar makes the editor's cut — a few politicians, a token "feminist" — generally the list is one of accomplished men. Why is this? Have female Scholars failed to achieve? Have they let the side down?

The Rhodes Project gives a clear and emphatic answer to this, and the answer is no. Women Rhodes Scholars have not failed to fulfill their promise, quite the reverse, and their exclusion from any list perhaps tells more about the list's compiler than about its potential subjects. This article suggests that the gathered data reveals an achievement by female Scholars too profound and radical to be reflected in any traditional list of notable alumni. For the manner in which they have succeeded subverts the very framework by which people have traditionally been judged to be successful — a framework based on the conventional male model, incorporating the tacit prejudices of a passing age.

Ironically, the subjects of the study have been able to do this because of the unique authority conferred on them by the award of the Rhodes Scholarship. By "winning" the award they have proven themselves successful even under the old standards, and therefore can re-invent "success" from within. You could say that these are "successful" women by definition. If you want to study success, then, you need only look at their paths. Whatever they do provides a model of what anyone can do to achieve success. It is the collective example of their diverse and richly layered lives which re-defines the concept. Their conventional success in receiving the

Rhodes Scholarship has given them a platform from which to voice a new and (temporarily) unconventional definition of what it means to succeed, which incorporates and expands upon the old definition.

Two Words of Warning: Limitations on the New Model

Firstly, the suggestion that a Rhodes Scholar acquires a special status as a role model just by being a Rhodes Scholar does not mean that *whatever* a Rhodes Scholar does is, de facto, successful. This would lead to absurdity. If a Rhodes Scholar were to commit a crime, it would still be a crime. The concept of “success” cannot stretch to include criminal or anti-social conduct without losing a core part of its meaning. However, these extreme and hypothetical examples do not detract from the general view that female Rhodes Scholars can define success by example.

Secondly, it must be noted that Rhodes Scholars, and more particularly, those that have agreed to take part in the Rhodes Project, necessarily hail from a particular demographic. By far the greatest proportion has come from the United States and Canada, and so their views and life choices are likely to reflect a general western bias. Furthermore, their backgrounds and beliefs probably do not even reflect a representative cross-section of their own countries’ populations. They come from backgrounds in which many of their parents stressed the importance of being civically active and fighting the world’s fight. Fewer grew up in an atmosphere which stressed the need to earn money.¹ The most common occupations of either parent or of the Scholars themselves are related to education, and the number of academics among Scholars and their fathers outstrips those in any other occupation.² The subjects support political parties that are mainly center or left of center, with only four percent declaring an affiliation with the right or center-right.³ Whether or not these factors played any role in their attainment of the Rhodes Scholarship in the first place, they must be borne in mind when evaluating the universality of any definition of success derived from their lives.

¹ 83 responses noted an emphasis in their upbringing on being civically active, 69 noted the need to fight the world’s fight, while only 42 noted an emphasis on earning money.

² 29 of the 210 respondents listed their father’s occupation as academia; a further 11, as teaching. The next most common grouping is found in medicine (25 of 210). Where the respondents’ mothers were employed, an overwhelming 33 out of 135 worked in teaching; the next most common occupation was secretarial work (13 of 135) and 12 listed their mother’s occupation as academia. Of the Scholars themselves, 78 out of 208 work in academia compared to the next most frequently cited occupations – law (14) and working for a not-for profit (13).

³ It is noted that of the Americans who answered this question, two percent named themselves as Republican Party supporters; 98% identified themselves as Democrats.

The Nature of Success: Traditional Versus New

The old measures of success, reflected in notable alumni lists, focused on external accomplishment. Public office, community standing, wealth, and power were prime indicators, while matters of a personal or domestic nature went unnoticed. Achievement was supposed to be objective and quantifiable. It was something that could be adequately displayed in a list. By those standards not all female (or male) Rhodes Scholars are successful, but those standards need not, and in fact, do not, apply. The standards have been assessed and largely rejected by the Scholars themselves. The absence of women from the lists is therefore no reflection on the women's success; the lists are simply irrelevant as a gauge. Their success cannot always be captured through obvious external markers.

The new model of success, unlike the old, is fluid and in some sense more "subjective." It resides in the achievement of personal goals set by the individual rather than in the accumulation of public accolades. A person may still strive after old-style success, but that goal can co-exist with other ones which might formerly have been classified as "alternative" or "personal." They simply represent complementary aspects of a mature personality. A person can and should be able to pursue both. Furthermore, success is not just the achievement of a goal but includes the journey there. Indeed, the destination may change along the way, and this ability to adapt and develop is key to the new understanding of success. As such, "success" eludes easy and definite listing. It is a carefully executed symphony of qualities, desires, and effort which cannot always be subsumed under a single tag.

The Subjectivity of Success

There are two dimensions to its "subjectivity." On one plane, the path to success is subjective because the individual must frame her own goals. This is not qualitatively different from the old system of course. Individuals seeking traditional recognition still had to choose how to achieve it. But since the old routes to success were more limited, the main decision concerned simply the field of endeavor. That decision meant the path to the top was well traveled and clear, admitting few deviations en route. The traditional deviation of women to have children was enough to sideline their careers. Under the new, more fluid definition of success, an individual must choose not only their field of interest but also what it means to succeed and how they will achieve it. Success is not necessarily marked by salary or institutional status. The way there is not always straight up the corporate ladder. It may be, but it need not be. Each case will need

individual determination.

On another plane, success is subjective because it requires a certain amount of self-awareness. Virtually all of the interviewees equate success with the achievement of balance. In the main this balance is thought of as practical, though a few describe it as “spiritual.” Initially, the process of achieving balance involves an evaluation of one’s own ideals, interests and desires, which then leads to an extrapolation of specific goals. Notably, none of the Rhodes Scholars interviewed have a single goal. They want to achieve professionally and personally, blurring the former sharp distinction between the two. Even the most dedicated career women want to shine in areas beyond their chosen field. The few that call themselves “stay-at-home moms” nevertheless have fingers in other pies, ranging from work in the community or on a particular socio-political cause to a yet un-credited career in writing, education or healthcare. Since Rhodes Scholars have multiple goals, it is easy to see why the ability to strike a balance is central to their understanding of success.

Balance Not Sacrifice

While the subjects of the study stress the need to balance coexistent demands on their time, they view this as a positive condition. The balancing of various tasks is not a matter of compromise or sacrifice. It represents a necessary corollary to embracing a full and purposeful life. If some possible goals are abandoned, it is simply because the individual has decided that they are unimportant to her and thus not of value. Objecting to the use of the term “sacrifice” by her interviewer, one Scholar (USA 1992) explained: “to me they don’t look like sacrifices, they look like things I don’t want to do anymore.”⁴ Another (USA 1989) simply said, the “language of sacrifice is...wrong.”⁵ As one Scholar (Canada 1990) pointed out, if you can be productive in more than one area of your life “you are probably more effective and more engaged in all of it.”⁶ This suggests that a state of balance is not just a tool for managing life, but a desired state in its own right.

⁴ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1992) East Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

⁵ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1989) Telephone interview. 28 April 2006.

⁶ Rhodes Scholar (Canada 1990) East Coast interview. 27 March 2006.

What Success Looks Like in the Lives of Women Rhodes Scholars

Of primary significance here is the diversity of ways in which the subjects of the study have succeeded. The means of striking a balance — i.e., of achieving success — are as variable as personality and circumstance. In the words of one Scholar (USA 1984): “There are no rules; there are no formulas to figure out how [to achieve success]. Everybody’s got to strike the balance that works for their own life.”⁷ The following examples illustrate the many varied faces of success.

Examples

For one Scholar (USA 1986) in state office, a work/life balance has meant a conscious reversal of the traditional husband/wife roles. Choosing a partner who was “very bright, very passionate about his work” but yet “in no way, shape or form as ambitious” as she is, was crucial to her ability to succeed. But it was a choice that went against a perceived pressure on women “to marry someone who’s at least their equal” in terms of traditional ambition. Ironically, she found that this societal pressure concerning choice of partner worked directly against its pressure to achieve in the public domain. By ignoring society’s views on marriage, this Scholar found a partner who supports her wish to pursue an ambitious career while still enjoying the fruits of family life. When asked if either she or her husband would have ever left their respective jobs to handle the domestic front, she answered without hesitation that “she would have made [him] quit.” And her attitude is not necessarily selfish, any more so than when it is the husband who decides to keep working and the wife stays home to look after the kids. As this Scholar says, she understands herself well enough to realize that if she were to give up her professional life and ambitions it would “not be a good solution for anybody.”⁸

Another Scholar (Canada 1978) with children and an ambitious banking career, is happy to earn less money if it means she can live in a community where family life is valued and accommodated. Her dedication to professional goals and the achievement of success by traditional standards is obvious from her interview, yet even her climb up the corporate ladder has not been standard. Instead of awaiting promotion, she has identified under-served niches which her employer has allowed her to fill.⁹

⁷ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1984) East Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

⁸ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1986) West Coast interview. 30 Aug. 2006.

⁹ Rhodes Scholar (Canada 1978) Europe interview. 12 Oct. 2006.

Other Scholars in high powered professional positions with no children, who would seem to epitomize the traditional ideal of a Rhodes Scholar, nevertheless reject money and recognition as measures of success. One (USA 1977) called success a “multi-faceted phenomenon” that must take account of achievement in “home, family life, romantic life, work, hobbies.”¹⁰ For these women, success must include a contribution to the public good and time to engage in personal relationships.

Some Rhodes Scholars have chosen to leave their professional careers after having children and devote themselves primarily to parenting. Notably, all of these women still work in areas other than those domestic, although one (USA 1988) laughs at a friend’s description of her as the “best educated housewife on the street.”¹¹ This Scholar is a writer who felt she would not have been qualified to write the children’s books she hopes to publish without the experience of bringing up children. For this Scholar, success resides in a balanced life in which both partners can be home early enough to enjoy meals with their children while still pursuing professional interests to the extent that time allows. She points out that such a balanced lifestyle and broad view of success is consistent with the values underlying the award of the Rhodes Scholarship. Indeed, the selection criteria explicitly seek qualities of “personal rectitude,” “compassion,” and “sense of public good” as well as academic excellence.

Common Qualities

Despite differences in lifestyle and goals, the data reveals some common qualities of female Rhodes Scholars which further help to define “success.” For a start, they are energetic. This is one of the most common terms that they use to describe themselves. It is also evident from their lives, in which 88 percent work in a paid capacity, and of these, most work full time, i.e., at least 35 hours a week. Of those who have children, all but eight percent continued to work after their children were born. But in addition to professional and family commitments, many of the women interviewed still find time to contribute towards projects for the benefit of the local or wider community. These projects are often motivated by a passion for the arts or are concerned with a particular social issue or awareness of injustice. Their willingness to engage in these projects reveals a quiet confidence that action, even at the local level, contributes positively to society at large and to their own development as individuals within that society. Similarly,

¹⁰ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1977) East Coast interview. 20 July 2005.

¹¹ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1988) Telephone interview. 26 July 2005.

Scholars with children tend to express the view that their most immediate impact on society is through their children's upbringing. A wish to spend time with their children is therefore not just a personal desire. By teaching them to be socially responsible, they are serving the public good and fighting the world's fight.

An indifference to money as a motivating factor is another attribute of female Rhodes Scholars. Of course, some would like to have more money, but over three-quarters state that they have as much as they need. This is perhaps not surprising given that most of them enjoy a household income in excess of \$100,000.¹² But their indifference to money seems to be more than a response to present financial sufficiency. When asked the primary motivation behind career choice, intellectual challenge was the one most frequently cited, followed by its suitability for their particular skill set or its ability to fulfill a lifetime passion. Financial considerations trailed far behind.¹³ When asked whether they worked primarily to support a lifestyle, the overwhelming response was "no."¹⁴ The interviews bear this out. One Rhodes Scholar, for example, decided to go live with her husband and family in a village in Italy. This move has greatly reduced her earning power but she feels this is offset by the quality of her lifestyle.

The study's subjects are also united in their quest for happiness. For most, success involves or is synonymous with happiness. "Really," one Scholar (USA 1994) states, "[success] boils down to being happy and what you do day to day." The data abounds with such responses.¹⁵

Do Women Rhodes Scholars Feel Successful?

Most of the respondents do consider themselves successful. But while 87 percent responded affirmatively to this question, only 14 percent described themselves as "winners." These statistics are telling. Traditionally, success has been equated with the winning of public awards and honors. By separating their view of success from that of being a "winner," women Rhodes Scholars have clearly discarded the traditional definition. Nevertheless, the interviews

¹² The respondents' total household income is evenly spread over a wide range. The income of approximately a third of the respondents is less than \$100,000; of another third it is between \$100,000 and \$200,000; while the last third has an income in excess of \$200,000, with five percent receiving an income above \$500,000.

¹³ Out of 112 responses, 93 listed "intellect" as a primary motivation; 71 listed "skill set," 67 listed "life passion," 32 listed "chance" and only 31 listed "financial considerations."

¹⁴ 83 percent answered "no."

¹⁵ Rhodes Scholar (USA 1994) Telephone interview. 2 April 2006.

do reveal a residual unease on the part of some Scholars about their chosen paths. This reticence is perhaps natural at the vanguard of any movement (however unwitting) for social change. It is hard to insist on your own success when those around you are applying the standards of the past. And this is particularly true of a concept like “success” which registers in the public domain. It may also explain the slightly defensive aspect in the need to imbue a private activity, such as bringing up one’s children, with a public purpose -- that of fighting the world’s fight. As the previous Scholar notes, it is hard to feel success in a vacuum, for society’s disappointment lowers your own self-esteem.

The Rhodes Scholars’ view of their own success, however, is perhaps less important than the example offered by their lives. These women do not re-define “success” through argument and public discourse; instead, they each set an example that redefines success for the rest of us. Their life choices speak for themselves.

Conclusion

The Rhodes Project has gathered a vast amount of data about well-educated, ambitious and conventionally “successful” women. Their success was at first defined by the Rhodes Scholarship, which qualified them for inclusion in the study. The data, however, which reveals a vast array of lifestyles and goals, has cast a wholly different light on the nature of success itself. It provides a snapshot of changing social attitudes. For these women have used the confidence gained through early conventional success to go on and lead lives which sometimes balk at convention. They are nevertheless successful. They may not seek public office or high social status, but fame and recognition are no longer the only marks of success. Instead, success resides in the ability to lead a balanced and personally fulfilling life. The old dichotomies which pitted career goals against personal ones are being discarded in favor of a more holistic approach where a person — man or woman — can combine elements of both. Thus, an individual can shape the world to fit his or her own needs rather than feeling slave to its dictates. By changing social expectations in this way, female Rhodes Scholars as a group are even fulfilling the traditional leadership expectations inherent in the Rhodes Scholarship brand.

The new model of success offers an exciting alternative to the rigid career paths of old. It is flexible and inclusive. It appreciates that society is made up of people, each with unique complexities. By shifting the focus of “success” away from the public arena towards the personal and local, it gives paramount importance to the individual, while still appreciating that a

successful person lives in and must serve society. Thus a “successful” person can have it all — career, family, personal relationships, political and social standing, aesthetic pleasure — by getting the balance right. That is the goal, at least: with a bit of thought and determination a successful person can have her or his cake and eat it too.