Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume One)

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Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature [...] honey gatherers of the mind.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
Leah Bagley enters the coffee house in a graceful manner. Her petite figure and soft demeanor is felt in her smile. As she walks towards us, a short strand of her hair falls in front of her and she proceeds to run her fingers through her short hair. A youthful gesture, one of many she makes leading us to question her age. Her demeanor is happy and relaxed, but we can tell that she is also poised, collected, and in control.

We shake hands, her grip startling me. It is so firm for such a small lady, but her smile softens the shock. Her lavender scarf highlights her soft features along with her kindness as she begins to express her gratitude for our meeting. A genuine soul indeed. After our introductions, we begin discussing the main objective of our project. Her smile widens, and her soft blue eyes seem to brighten.

“So,” I say with a slight pause, “tell me about your work. What exactly do you do here at Pacific?”

She takes a deep breath before beginning. “Well, there are a lot of things I do, actually.” She’s been here at Pacific for fifteen years, throughout which she has established herself in a positive way. She’s held different jobs at the university, including a web manager and Executive Assistant to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Sometime later, she became Administrative Assistant for the School of Arts and Humanities. She explains how her current job is a bit of a pay cut from the previous job she had, but to her, it doesn’t matter. “Sitting behind a desk for so long, it was a different kind of stress. The job I have now is much more satisfying.”

Her love of seeing students succeed from freshmen to seniors is a reward in itself, and that love stemmed from something greater: teaching. Before life at Pacific, she was an elementary educator in Hillsboro. She taught for a number of years, but eventually decided to work in the college atmosphere. “It’s so gratifying, especially being a part of the arts and media
aspect.” While her job label says “Administrative Assistant of Arts & Humanities,” it doesn’t give credit to the larger list of things that she does on a daily basis. She slips her dark rimmed reading glasses and peers at her job description on the computer screen in her office: attend meetings and coordinates if needed, handle financial aspect, do letters of agreements, help with web management, assist in press releases, and input information in regards to the media and arts program for faculty and for specific major information.

Our eyes widen. Her chin dips down as she peers over her glasses at us, and calmly says, “I’m not done yet.” Schedule meetings for faculty and students, one of the most important details she is responsible for: keep the Taylor-Mead [Performing Arts Center] up to date as far as remodeling and meeting the student’s needs, help with pacesetters, and handle formal wear for the students. Finally, at the bottom of the list it says: “must also have the ability to multitask and jumble tasks in a calm manner.”

She glances at both of us, and giggles. A scare with osteoporosis was all it took for Leah to gain an interest in what has now become one of her passions: exercising. “I exercise every morning,” she says, adding that it’s frightening to see her friends battling health issues. She is in impeccable shape, her lean figure in a Columbia brand jacket to fight off the cold outside, sitting on her hands in an effort to warm them up. She has various exercise machines in her home, including an elliptical and a rowing machine. She mentions other hobbies she likes as well, such as backpacking and fly-fishing, an interesting choice as she’s wearing earrings in the shape of fish during our first meeting.

Leah speaks fondly of her family, jumping up animatedly from her computer chair when she remembers she has photographs of them in her office. She hands us picture frames adorned with photos of members of her family: her son in Japan, her daughter that lives in Corvallis, and one with her two oldest daughters smiling into the camera, just to name a few. She also shows us photos printed out on a word document, saying she wants to make a collage with them at some point, excitement and pride shining bright in her eyes as she points to individual squares on each page.

Living on ten acres has enabled Leah and her husband to have a variety of animals. She speaks of steer they plan to slaughter—one cheekily named Hamburger—taking us by surprise since she had introduced them in a way that suggested she saw them as part of her family. They also have two cats—Scout and Ranger—although Leah is more of a dog person herself. She tells us how one of her cats, Hunter, disappeared one day. To this day, she doesn’t know what happened to him. “I think the coyotes got him,” a sad laugh escaping her lips.

She goes on to tell us how her chickens aren’t sleeping in their coop and instead have cooped up on the back porch of the house. She and her husband found them one
night and didn’t think very much of it. Their initial thought was that they had moved back there since one of their lights illuminating the back field during the nighttime was pointing almost directly towards the chicken coop. But this continued for numerous nights after, and the chickens have since begun to lay their eggs on the back porch and make it their home.

During a tour of the Taylor-Meade Performing Arts Center building, Leah swiftly moves through the halls, pointing at different areas to explain to us what they are and whether she has a role within them or not. She shows us the lockers that can be rented out to students to place their instruments in. We pass the Bump Music Lounge, in which she had a hand in renovating this past year, ordering the furniture and deciding what color to paint one of the walls. Her voice is laced with enthusiasm during our tour, and at its end in her office, she has a seat in her chair, the computer screen glowing bright behind her filled with her day’s work.