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AS TOLD TO ARUNI GUNASEGARAM

The pattern I see in people I consider to be successful is that they work very hard, they are engaged in what they do, and they are more than willing to help others. When I look at the mentors in my life, it's clear to me that successful people aren't afraid of other people being successful.

My life has been so rich in mentors. My mom taught me early on you have to work hard. She had a construction company, which you can imagine was very unconventional for a woman in rural Texas in the 1970s. My brothers and I worked for the company. I roofed houses. I grew up totally unaware of gender barriers even in rural, small-town Texas because of my mother. Now, my mentors are people like Sarah Weddington, Rose Spector, Diane Dwight, Molly Ivins, and Liz Carpenter. My joke about this crowd is they make up the Great Austin Matriarchy. These women all know each other, they help each other, and they help younger women. For that reason, I think they have tremendous amounts of influence in the legal and political communities.

Successful people may not have money or power, but their influence has power. Liz Carpenter, for instance, has no institutional power. She has power purely out of her personal influence and people's respect for her as an individual, not because of any title she holds or money she controls. And she uses that influence for good.

I was not raised in a religious family at all, but I was raised in a religious culture: the Bible Belt South. At UT, I came into contact with all kinds of people and religions, and I learned that it doesn't matter what cultural trappings you put on the lesson, all faiths have the same central teaching: you do well when you do good by others.

Another Biblical adage that I think resonates really well with the notion of success is, "To whom much is given, much is expected." I absolutely believe that we have a duty to do good with what power and influence we're given. It really upsets me when I see someone who has achieved a high office but doesn't use it for the betterment of the state or country.

I don't think luck, if you define it as 100 percent chance,



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has much to do with success; success has much more to do with a willingness to seize interesting opportunities. Successful people see opportunities as challenges and not something scary. Wildly successful business people are smart enough to spot a need and gutsy enough to go out on a limb.

When I decided to run for county chair, I experienced a lot of angst, so I went to talk to a colleague of mine. She'd spent her whole life toiling away in big law firms and, by this stage in her life, had kids in private schools and a house payment. She was stuck. She could not go anywhere. She looked at me and said, "You're an idiot if you don't do this. If you don't do this, it will set your life back 10 years." Her point was that even though it was going to cost me money and appear to set back my legal career, it wouldn't. You're not going to get out and know people in the community when you are locked up in a law firm billing 14 hours a day, which is what I was doing. "Take the opportunity," she said. So I did, and yes, I've made less money than I would have had I stayed on the firm track, but I'm a lot happier and have a lot more opportunities. So it's not so much luck, I think, as a willingness to step out on a limb.

My goal now is to get people elected who will implement policies that are healthy for the state. We have an incredibly diverse state. If we don't educate young Hispanics, the state will go in the toilet economically, period. If you don't understand that and accept that, you can't move the state forward. I want to help build a better society. I often think about that old Chinese blessing that is also a curse, "May you live in interesting times." I want to live in interesting times.

The "Success to Me" series is prepared by Aruni Gunasegaram, BBA '92, MBA '98, an Austin entrepreneur, and Pam Losefsky, an Austin writer and editor