

# Leilah Powell



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**T**HE WORD “SUCCESS” OFTEN SEEMS TO BE ASSOCIATED with material things, high-net-worth individuals and those with significant financial accomplishments. But real success is being part of something bigger than yourself and accomplishing your own goals. There is a kind of satisfaction in leading your life like that, and to me that is success.

Success is not perfection. You can overwhelm yourself by demanding perfection — and I think that applies to the workplace, your family, everything. There’s nothing wrong with demanding excellence, as long as you don’t expect to meet that demand every day. A successful person sets goals and works steadily toward them but has enough flexibility to understand when it’s time to realign those goals or take a break.

Another component of success is self-knowledge. Commitment to a goal involves understanding who you are and what you have to contribute, what your weaknesses are. A sense of humor and humility are additional keys to success along with perseverance, flexibility, and self-awareness. I see these traits in key community leaders I’ve known.

The most successful community leaders make everyone feel that their initiative is a community effort. They make sure they get feedback and get other people to buy in. No one’s in office forever, so in order for anything that’s of lasting value to the community to survive, you have to build sustainability into it. Successful politicians focus on issues that are important to a broad base of people in the long run, not just in the short term.

Chance is an incredibly significant element in the political process; and certainly in the short term, luck plays a huge role in the success of a particular effort. For instance, this past session in the Texas Legislature, many good ideas were lined up, but then the Texas Youth Commission scandal broke. If you were working on another reform effort, you didn’t have a chance. But

over a lifetime the qualities that you bring to your work — perseverance, flexibility, humility — can make you successful even if luck runs against you.

I have really been inspired by my parents. My dad, Boone Powell, is a 1956 UT architecture graduate, and both of my parents were involved in architecture and urban planning, which is really the physical manifestation of community. Often, when I think about contributing to a community, I think about the issues they cared about: community spaces, transportation, and housing. You have to be engaged and involved in your community if you’re going to be successful.

I also believe that great teachers are extremely successful. Almost everyone remembers the contributions that a specific teacher made in his or her life. They have a huge opportunity to get kids excited about learning. My mom was a teacher. She passed away in 1990, but I still have people come up to me and say, “Your mom taught a class on urban development that changed the way I think about the world!”

When I was at UT, Kent Butler was that professor for me. He was an environmentalist and an environmental planner before it was the topic *du jour*. He has steadily worked on bringing about awareness of these issues and has taught generations of planners. He has a tremendous sense of humor about what he does, and he understands the big picture. Texas has not been particularly open to environmentalism or even embraced planning, but he’s brought a huge amount of curiosity and enthusiasm to the cause. To me, he is “success.”

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