



**The Youth Career Coach Inc.
Career Interview #2**



**Beverly E. Ledbetter
Vice President & General Counsel
Brown University**

How did I meet Beverly?

I first heard of Beverly while researching the top women of color in the state of Rhode Island. I moved to Rhode Island in 2005 and it was one of the best decisions I had ever made. I often say Rhode Island made me the woman I am today. Don't get me wrong I am from Boston, Massachusetts but when I left my parents home to pursue my MBA Degree at Johnson & Wales University, I had no idea why I was really moving or what I was meant to do with my life.

It was customary for me to research prominent women of color and it was online where I saw a picture of Beverly E. Ledbetter. She was at that time and still is the Vice President/General Counsel at Brown University. Yes, the Ivy League institution. I remember staring at her picture thinking wow, to meet her one day would be my honor. And not only did I have the opportunity to meet her but it was because of her why I became an AKA, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated. I didn't join a sorority because of something I had read in a book, or because of a movie where people were steppin' (a form of dance). It was because in my real life I could touch, talk to and gain advice from a woman who had achieved such greatness in my eyes. Not only professional achievements but she has positively impacted the lives of women across to the globe.

It was privilege to be able to interview Vice President, Beverly Ledbetter about her upbringing, career and obtain some words of wisdom from this dynamic woman.

Texas to Howard University

Natascha: Where were you born and where did you go to high school.

Beverly: I was born in Texas and went to high school in Houston.

Natascha: I read that you earned your Bachelor's Degree at the wonderful HBCU (Historical Black College & University) Howard University. What was your major in college?

Beverly: Chemistry and Math

Natascha: What made you pick chemistry and math as majors?

Beverly: Probably because those were interesting, but if I tell you another reason, you're going to laugh, you're going to say it's not true!

Majoring in Chemistry & Math

Natascha: Tell us!

Beverly: The science departments were right across from the women's dorm. I lived in something called the Lower Valley. If you go up the hill, the women's dorms were in a quadrangle. That makes it sound like you were lazy and I wasn't. All the science departments were in this Lower Valley, below the library. It made it very convenient, but I decided on that before. I think what is interesting is what changes. A lot of people are interested in a lot of things. If you get locked into science, you end up with a prescribed regimen of classes. **Like many people you feel that everything you've done needs to count. That's a trap for the wary. There are times when you have to say everything counts for making me who I am.** Everything doesn't necessarily count for who I want to be. Every experience counts in making you who you are, but not every experience you have is necessarily relevant to what you want to be. **You discover yourself as you go along.**

High School

Natascha: In high school did you think you wanted to go into science?

Beverly: No, I wanted to be a writer. I wasn't career oriented in high school. I was focused on excelling in whatever studies I had. I excelled in all my studies, weather they were literary, science, or social science. I would spend more time doing shorthand than I did doing chemistry. The chemistry came easy and the shorthand didn't.

Natascha: Did you always have good grades in high school?

Beverly: Yes, I always had good grades.

Natascha: Did you ever feel bad for having good grades in school?

Beverly: No. I think that may have been a concern in college, but in high school, certainly not.

Mom & Dad

Natascha: Let's talk a little bit about your family. Do you think your dad had a profound influence on you with your studies?

Beverly: Yes, my father taught science in junior high school. Then he later became a guidance counselor. He was always doing experiments and things. I think he had a profound influence on my concentration in college. My mother was exactly the opposite. My mother taught English. My passion was for literature, but my active pursuit of excellence was in science. **At 7 years old we were stringing up makeshift telegraphs and other science experiments.**

My Brother

Natascha: Did you have siblings?

Beverly: I have a brother, who is now deceased. He was half a generation apart. He was 12 years younger than I was. We weren't really raised together. I was in college by the time he became a person of interest, someone you could communicate with other than to entertain him or provide for his needs. He was a person to laugh and have him create happiness in your life. By the time he became someone you wanted to talk to or have a discussion with, I was in college.

Natascha: Where there any expectations of you? What part did your parents play in setting these expectations?

Beverly: Well, let me go back to high school. I think in high school, my father taught in secondary school, my mother taught in college, so I think the expectations of having good grades was there. I lived in a college town. My mother taught at Prairie View, my father taught in junior high in Houston. In a college town, all the kids of college professors were expected to do well. Now these college professors were probably making less money than the high school teachers because it was a black college. Nevertheless there is sort of a native level of confidence that is associated with a socioeconomic condition. This is me speaking, I don't have evidence and proof. I think that people come from educated families have a basic confidence level in terms of communications and so forth. That doesn't mean they were going to excel, but they usually aren't the people who flunk everything. They can comprehend, they can communicate, they can read, they can write. They may not excel at all of those, but there is a basic confidence level that comes from the second generation of educated people. I believe that to be true. So usually you can look at language patterns. They may not be able to pass a grammar test, why you use this here, why you put that there, but they speak the King's English, so to speak. They may not be excellent communicators, but they are effective communicators.

Extracurricular Activities

Natascha: Did you participate in any extracurricular activities in high school?

Beverly: Yes, I was in everything except cheerleading and band. I think it had everything to do with expression as an art form. I wasn't in glee club or band, I couldn't sing, I couldn't carry a tune.

Natascha: Give me an example of something you did in high school.

Beverly: I was in the ROTC, which was called NDCC, National Defense Cadet Core at that time.

Natascha: Were you in student council?

Beverly: Yes, and Honor Society. I was only into academic things. The only non-academic activity was the tennis team. I was the manager of the volleyball team because I couldn't play. I was a less than adequate player, which is not uncommon, that a person with non-athletic skills could become the manager. But I could play tennis.

Natascha: I played tennis in high school so did you play singles or doubles?

Beverly: I played singles and doubles, but I was a better singles player.

Natascha: Did you participate in any activities in college?

Beverly: I was one of the editors of the yearbook. I belonged to a theater group but was never really active in the theater group. I worked on set design. I never auditioned for any play. I did do some journal with the paper. At one time I was a contributing member to the paper.

Grades

Natascha: What about grades in college? Were your grades always good?

Beverly: I think the interest in extracurricular adversely affect grades. You can get overwhelmed with extracurricular stuff. Even though you have the ability, you have to prove yourself.

Book Recommendations

Natascha: Do you have any book recommendations for young people? I read somewhere that one of your favorite books is **The Secret Life of Bees**.

Beverly: That was simply the last book I read.

Natascha: What is your favorite book?

Beverly: My favorite writer is a writer named Eric Larson. I like a lot of his work. I like Eric Larson because he writes non-fiction in such a way that it is as entertaining as fiction. He tells a good story.

Natascha: From a high school students/ prospective, not many of them are reading outside of school. Would you say you were as avid a reader now as you were in high school or college?

Beverly: Even more so. I wouldn't say college, because in college they don't tell you what to read. I did belong to the book club in college. My college was one of those early colleges that had an actual book club. Now it's common, but it wasn't then. In the book club, you didn't have anything to do with the selection. It was run by the physics professor. The only commitment was that you had to read and you had to show up for the discussion. The faculty picked the books, things they thought we should read, like **Catcher in the Rye**. They ordered the books, you came to the discussion, and they passed out the book to the next one. The books were free to us.

Living in two different places

Natascha: Wow, it seems like you read a whole lot.

Beverly: My parents were always married, but they live in two different places. I was home with my mom; I stayed with my father during the week. I went to school in Houston where my father taught, but I went home on the weekends where my mother was. My mother was a very avid reader. I was a reader at age 5 and 6. My mother bought me the classics in two forms, what now would be considered the educational series, written in such a way for a younger audience. I read things like **Jane Eyre** at age 8, 9, 10. My biggest reading period was age 8 to age 14. I still have some of those books that she gave me, and I have all the English literature classics.

Career as a Lawyer

Natascha: Thank you for sharing these fantastic books options. I'd like to ask you about your career occupation. I see a few different things. When someone says occupation, you start with Brown first, Vice President and General Council?

Beverly: Well, that's my title. I'm an attorney. I'm also the Chief Legal Officer, which means there's an administrative component to my job as well. I have legal and regulatory affairs. Both VP and General Council are titles. I'm a managing attorney, I manage the legal affairs. When you become a manager then you do

more managing, you supervise others with delivery. If you're the chief of medicine at a hospital, you've got to manage people who deliver the medicine and spend half your time on management and structure, which is much more pleasant.

Natascha: I read that you provide advice and legal opinions on such areas as major policy initiatives and programs to prevent administrative and legal problems for the university through early identification of important issues.

Beverly: That's correct. And what that really means is that it's my job to not only be current with respect to what the legal issues are, but to anticipate what they will be. I have the function of addressing the current issues but also anticipating legal issues and implementing preventive strategy.

Natascha: How do you do that when there are so many issues?

Beverly: That's tough. It does fit in very well with what I like to do. I like to read. I love enhancement. My biggest joy is enhancing my understanding and knowledge quotient. Everyday I'd like to know more than the day before. When I walk into a room, and there's a choice of either popular literature magazines or substantive, I'll pick the substantive. I'll read about anything. I'll read the weather, books on thunder and lightning, geological formations; I love geopolitics, much more than career politics. I love the association of geological issues. What is it that makes Russia what Russia is, versus what South America is or Asia is? Know things like only 1/9th of China is arid. Politics are driven by geo and agricultural needs, geography, lack of an agrarian culture. I love the big picture, and that is putting together all the influences as opposed to concentrating on one issues and try to separate that and pretend it's unrelated to something else. I love the integration of issues. What I love to do presents a perfect opportunity to do that. That explains who I am and how I like to get involved.

Sports NCAA and the Law

Natascha: I read that you served on the NCAA board. Do you still do that now?

Beverly: Infractions committee, not board, for the claims of the colleges that have cheated or have done something improper in terms of recruitment or suspension of players.

Natascha: How did you get involved in that?

Beverly: I was nominated for it.

Natascha: Speaking of nominations, I had a question about highlights of your career. Is there any moment in time that you think was the biggest highlight? I read that President Reagan nominated you.

Beverly: That was a nice gesture, but they never created that position.

Natascha: Any highlights of your career?

Beverly: No, I think the transition of the appointment in Oklahoma was a highlight. I think a highlight was coming to Brown. There were two of us who were the first Housing Court Judges in Providence. We recreated the Housing Corps. The other highlight was being elected president of the National Association of College and University Attorneys.

Natascha: Did you always imagine that you were going to be an attorney?

Beverly: No. I just had lots of diverging interests. You try to find things you're good at. And as a result of me finding law, I was just honored by my law school this year, and I also received an honorary degree from Roger Williams.

Natascha: Yes, I read about that!

Beverly: I was honored by my own law school at commencement this year. I received for the second time, the Honor of the Court, which is the highest honor a law school can bestow on you.

Mentors

Natascha: Did you have any heroes or mentors?

Beverly: Aside from my mother and my father. My mother in particular. When my mother retired from teaching, she was a judge for over 20 years.

Friend-Enemies

Natascha: What has been your biggest obstacle in your life? Has there been anything tragic that you had to process and keep moving forward?

Beverly: You really have to understand that people don't line up easily. It's the friend-enemy concept. Everybody is not going to be appreciative of your success. I think that's particularly difficult for minority women. Minority women have to compete with majority women. They have to compete among themselves. You've probably experienced that same thing. That's something that is always surprising.

Natascha: How do you deal with it?

Beverly: You just have to keep moving. For me, it was coming to Rhode Island. When someone comes into a successful position as a minority, it's difficult sometimes, when you're one of the players. There are people who don't know your background. They're glad you came and you have the position, but they don't necessarily support.

Career Goals

Natascha: When you were a kid, did you ever say I want to be this or that?

Beverly: Not as a profession, but I always wanted to write, but not to be a writer as my profession. I knew that I appreciated writing, so I used to write plays. You need to make sure that you understand what you do, from who you are, it will not always form who you become. If you decide you want to be this, and put all your energy into that, you say now you've got to keep doing this because you've spent so much time on it. That's an inhibiting factor, not something that helps.

When you go to college you find out that there are different things you're good at that you didn't envision yourself being in. You might have an experience that is accidental. You might have signed up for a class because it was available, and then you enjoyed it. We have people at Brown that end up in geology. Geology has a lot of accidental students. People get really engaged in it, and then that's what they want to be. **I don't want people to get overinvested in a career goal.** They need to be very open to opportunities to see what they appreciate, what they like, what they're good at. If you happen to be good at what you like, that's wonderful! Being

good at what you like can't get any better. People get invested in what parents or society wants them to be.

Natascha: Can you quickly walk me through your career timeline, when you got out of college, what road you took to get where you are now?

Beverly: When I got out, for me, my career started when I was in graduate school. I did different things at different times. I graduated and engaged in post graduate studies. The big moment was when I decided to go to law school.

Natascha: Was that about 3 to 5 years out of undergraduate?

Beverly: Yeah, about 5 years. Basically I was in graduate school when I decided to go to law school.

Natascha: What types of jobs did you have before you went to law school?

Beverly: Adjunct teaching at a college, I taught high school one year, then I went to graduate school again, then I went to law school.

Natascha: In law school, did you do general studies?

Beverly: There are opportunities your second or third year to take certain kinds of classes. There are law schools geared towards certain kinds of professions. Harvard Law School people usually end up in the business profession. Certain law schools students end up in economics; it's good to know that 2/3 of the law school curriculum is prescribed, and 1/3 is pick what you want. I would recommend that people experiment. **Unless you're in the top 10%, where you can pick what you want to do, you end up getting a job and the job you get influences where you go.** You're either happy at the job or unhappy at the job.

Natascha: Did you intern while in graduate or law school?

Beverly: No.

Natascha: From law school you went straight into your first position.

Beverly: Yeah. I was a legal aide, but I'd represented people for one semester in domestic relations, and the next semester was in civil law, but it would vary.

Natascha: So share more about where you went next when you finished law school?

Beverly: No, I worked for a college in Oklahoma. I then became legal counsel, also noting I finished law school in 2 1/2 years. I was enrolled simultaneously in graduate school and law school. That was a no-no. It wasn't effective in terms of my academic progress. I stopped being a graduate student. I wasn't in a degree program. I always like bioengineering. I chose to devote myself to law school. I ended up coming out 1/2 year ahead of my plan. Then I took the position of legal counsel in Oklahoma. I was there 5 years and came to Rhode Island as the Chief legal counsel at Brown. I've been here 31 years.

Living on Purpose

Natascha: Do you feel as though you're living in your purpose?

Beverly: I have not fulfilled my purpose. I'd like to do so much more than I've done. My job is restrictive; it doesn't allow me a public persona that is different from that of my job. I'm engaged in a lot of other civic activities, but I'm politically muzzled.

Natascha: Do you feel as though you are where you're meant to be in your life?

Beverly: No. I don't think so. I feel there are things that I could have done to be much more than I am right now. When you take a job with a higher education institution in an administrative position, you are muzzled because the institutions are fragile in terms of constituents. If you're in a public institution they're trying to get state money. If you're in a private institution they're trying to get donations. Particularly when you're a legal counsel, you always have to defend and represent the institution's position, unlike a faculty member who could have a position entirely contrary to the institution. That doesn't mean I have one that is contrary. If I did have one, I wouldn't be able to express it.

Natascha: Anything you would change about your life?

Beverly: Oh yeah. I would not have stayed at one institution so long. I think moving around is good. I think change is good. **But, if you change too frequently, you raise questions about your stability. If someone is going to invest in you, they need to know you're going to be there more than two years. Be open to change. I don't think I've been consistent with that philosophy.** I was in my earlier years, but recently I've become too involved in the infrastructure.

Advice for Girls

Natascha: Lastly, any general advice for young girls?

Beverly: **Whatever you choose to do, do it well. Be discriminating about what you choose to do. Make delivered choices.** Don't feel that by having made that choice, that's the only thing you can do. Be open to change. Make choices, focus, do well. **If it doesn't work out, if it makes you miserable, change.** Have confidence in yourself that you're capable. But you have to make yourself capable. **Prepare yourself intellectually and emotionally.**