

Amelia Currin: The Road to Sweet Briar College via Silicon Valley

I will soon begin my first year at Sweet Briar College, and I have never been more excited to move forward with my life. At times, this journey seems long and tedious. In the quiet spaces of my mind, I often imagine an app called “Life Sync.” In this imaginary world, the tap of my finger would chart the proper path for my life using the same precision that summons an Uber, but as this technological crystal ball does not exist, my decision to attend Sweet Briar College emerged the old-fashioned way: I relied upon reason, intuition, perseverance and guts.

In recent weeks, many have asked me, “Why would you go to a school fraught with so many problems—a school that in March 2015 was slated for closure and whose head would have rolled off the chopping block if it weren’t for the intervention of crowd funding, litigation and court rulings?” Certainly, Sweet Briar’s brush with death will be debated for years to come, and as all the facts and details are not within my view, I will not begin to parse the elusive, the obscure and the confusing. Yet, through this ordeal, I have witnessed a powerful group of women rise up in the form of Saving Sweet Briar and leverage their clout to overcome insurmountable odds. Sweet Briar alumnae are a tenacious, powerful, devoted and capable group of women. To those who question my reasons to be a Vixen, I ask: “Who would not want to stand strong among their ranks?” These women are simply amazing!

When I began my college search several years ago, I fell in love with Sweet Briar’s beautiful, enchanting campus, but I soon found the school to be more than just a pretty place; I realized that this institution produces an impressive line of graduates who lead productive, successful lives.

Leah Busque is a wonderful case in point. With a bit of online research, I learned that this 2001 Sweet Briar graduate and corporate software engineer was a woman of decisive action. Her

gutsy plunge to end her established IBM career in 2008 to found the startup company TaskRabbit casts her as a larger-than-life embodiment of the capable, modern woman advancing in the global marketplace. Leah's TaskRabbit evolved into a technology marketplace, connecting people who need help with household jobs with fully vetted "Taskers" who provide the help at a fair rate. For example, if a person can't find the time to grocery shop, TaskRabbit pairs the person in need with someone who can do the shopping for them. TaskRabbit's app is a novel and elegant idea that revolutionizes the way work gets done in eighteen American cities and London. As curiosity often gets the best of me, I reached out to Leah and found her to be extremely amiable and willing to mentor me.

Historically, Sweet Briar alumnae have opened professional doors for students and graduates, and in August, I traveled to San Francisco to spend a day with Leah in the TaskRabbit office. The experience was invaluable and life-changing: My eyes have been opened to possibilities I never could have imagined. I gained a deeper understanding of how Sweet Briar women function in the dot-com arena — an area traditionally dominated by male CEOs.

To get an accurate picture of how TaskRabbit operates, I decided to use the service myself. Several days before arriving in San Francisco, I downloaded the TaskRabbit app and requested a Tasker to assist my father and me with our luggage and escort us around the city. Within moments of posting the request a Tasker named Alec took the job, and when we arrived in San Francisco the energetic young man was there to help us with luggage and transportation, suggested places to see, made restaurant reservations, dined with us, and even accompanied us on a two-hour Segway tour of Golden Gate Park and a few waterfront neighborhoods. Alec spent nine hours with us for the total cost of \$280. It was money well spent, as he was able to quickly

acclimate us to the culture of the city, and provide insight into various ways to move around the area. Thanks to TaskRabbit, my first day in San Francisco was a huge success.

I arrived at TaskRabbit early Tuesday morning with a full agenda ahead of me. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I was excited. I thought to myself, "How many girls my age have the chance to see the inner workings of a startup or shadow a role model such as Leah?" I was grateful.

As I waited for Leah to arrive, her assistant took me on a tour of the office, which I found to be clean, modern and spacious. The open floor plan creates a relaxed and trusting environment. Everyone has their own desk and several conference rooms line the walls. There is even a break room equipped with TVs, a refreshment center, a foosball table and couches. Someone was giving manicures in the corner — "Something we do often," Leah later told me. I decided instantly that this was a sophisticated yet relaxed place to spend one's workday!

Leah greeted me with a smile and a hug; it was like catching up with an old friend. She was excited about the busy day ahead. We jumped right in, starting with a team meeting. Leah's day was seamless: it was busy with meetings, calls and interviews, and even during the working lunch with Hearsay Social CEO Clara Shih, the pace didn't drop (though the two women did exchange personal thoughts on juggling family, motherhood and corporate management). Apart from lunch, one of the coolest things I witnessed was a software demo Leah presented for potential buyers. There was no downtime, and Leah's management of time was impressive. It was incredible to step back and watch Leah deal with a host of corporate issues. At one point, I even commented to Leah that her normal routine seemed like something out of a movie scene. A day at TaskRabbit is intriguing and fun; but it's all serious business, and while in no way does it take on the feel of NBC's "The Office," I'm sure she's ready for a laugh at the end of the day.

The visit to TaskRabbit was an experience unlike anything I have ever seen or done — it was surreal. In the late afternoon, I accompanied Leah to a Girls Who Code event at Facebook’s Menlo Park offices. During the hour-long ride from San Francisco, I chatted intimately with her to learn more about her philosophy on life, her thoughts of building a business, and her vision for Sweet Briar College going forward. When asked how she went from having the idea to create her own company to making it happen, she gave me a simple answer: Setting goals.

“It’s always important to have a mission — to have something to work towards,” she said.

Leah believes that her ability to create her own company is closely linked to the quality liberal arts education she received at Sweet Briar.

“Had I only wanted to be a software engineer, the classes in dance, art history and literature might not have been so relevant,” she said. “But I was always wanting more, there were always other things I wanted to explore, and the liberal arts portion of my education gives me a creative edge.”

In fact, Leah said that when hiring TaskRabbit employees, she always considers a person’s background and broader interests. She believes those with well-rounded backgrounds have a broader foundation to build upon; they can contribute to a company’s larger culture and strengthen the company’s potential for growth.

As a young alumna just out of college, Leah served a three-year term on the Sweet Briar Board of Directors and enjoyed that time tremendously. But she noted that this was 12 years ago, and things are different now. When Saving Sweet Briar asked her to serve on the new board, she did not hesitate, but answered with an emphatic, “Yes!” She relishes the opportunity to lend her

voice and become a part of the ongoing conversation about what the vision for Sweet Briar should be. Leah is bullish about Sweet Briar's future and long-term success.

“There is still a place for liberal arts education in America, and in particular, there's a place for women's education,” she argued.

Leah also pointed out that in higher education circles, the term STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, math) is being thrown around a lot these days, and its popularity will benefit Sweet Briar in the future. With strategic direction, she said, the College has as an opportunity to cast itself in that mold.

Leah is certain that women's colleges are still a relevant part of American education. To support this claim, she draws on current research conducted with first-year women interested in computer science who were segmented into small learning pools. The research shows that these same-sex learning groups produce long-term, measurable, sustainable learning outcomes.

“In essence,” Leah said, “when women work collaboratively on technology-based problems, they tend to stick with it; they thrive in this learning framework.”

When Leah reflected on how her experiences at Sweet Briar play a role in her current life and successes, she pointed to the mere existence of TaskRabbit and the philosophical platform it rests upon. She said that the culture she has created at TaskRabbit is indicative of the culture she was exposed to at Sweet Briar, including its honor code, friendliness, neighborliness, collaboration and transparency. Her Sweet Briar education gave her a thorough background in computer engineering.

“When I assumed my first job at IBM, I was able to take on each task with confidence because I had mastered the skills. Gender inequality didn't come into play. I didn't have to focus

on the inequalities that we sometimes see in these work environments because I was happy, confident, skilled and willing to be collaborative,” she said.

Leah seems to have navigated her way through the male-centered world of technology with success. She has balanced both a family and a thriving business, and when asked if she thinks that Silicon Valley’s reputation for undercutting women in the workplace is an accurate characterization, Leah’s answer doesn’t slight either gender.

“I think it’s hard for everyone, male and female, but there are certain challenges that women face when they try to have families; there’s just a lot more to juggle,” she said. Leah believes Sheryl Sandberg’s book “Lean In” realistically addresses the complexities facing working women: “In this world, there is basically no balance. The women who choose this lifestyle have to take it day by day. Their decision to be there, to show up, to step up becomes an act of choice made on a daily, sometimes hourly basis.”

Leah has certainly hit her stride as a successful CEO running an American company, but at the World Economic Forum leadership conference in Davos earlier this year, she was keenly aware that “gender inequalities exist between men and women on a massive scale across the globe.” As leaders from around the world acknowledge these disparities, changes can occur, Leah said. Building on this idea, she is quick to point out that Sweet Briar College is precisely the “kind of place that opens a path for women” — a path that in turn allows accomplished women to emerge as leaders on the local, national and world scene.

My brief glimpse into the world of Leah’s TaskRabbit is an experience difficult to capture in words alone. To say that it was dynamic and inspiring is an understatement, but I am sure that my trek to Silicon Valley has made me a better person. The case of Leah Busque speaks poignantly of Sweet Briar’s motto, “Rosam quae meruit ferat” (she who has earned the rose may

bear it): She has left the rolling magical hills, the green and luscious grasses, and the sounds of galloping horses back in ole Virginia, but the scent of the crushing rose travels with her, its sweetness wafting in the breeze. Leah is one of many Sweet Briar women who are blazing a path for countless generations of Sweet Briar women yet to come. Thanks, Leah, for a beautiful and inspiring day!

