

## Episode No. 7

# Seizing the Opportunity feat. Brandy Hays Morrison '05

[00:00] **Intro:** Welcome to Owl Have You Know, a podcast from Rice Business. This episode is part of our Pivot Series, where guests share stories of transformation in their lives and careers.

[00:14] **Brandy:** Being able to meet with an alum who had a similar story, I'm thinking, okay, I can do this, too.

[00:21] **Christine:** Today on Owl Have You Know: when Brandy Hays Morrison graduated from Rice Business in 2005, it was her second time graduating as an Owl. Today she talks about her many Rice experiences that led her on a path that's provided a diverse skill set. She has extensive experience in software development, strategy consulting in the public sector, business analysis, IT investment and global customs. One of her passions while she was an undergrad was starting a nonprofit whose mission was to bring more diversity and leadership to college campuses. She currently sits on the Rice University Board of Trustees and talks about how leaders can better tackle diversity, equity and inclusion issues.

[01:03] **Christine:** We're joined today by Brandy Hays Morrison, Rice Business Full-Time MBA Class of 2005, joining us from Washington, D.C. Brandy, we want to thank you for joining us on Owl Have You Know.

[00:33] **Brandy:** Thanks for having me, Christine.

[00:34] **Christine:** Well, first of all, let's start with, you are a two-time Owl, graduating first in 2000, double-majoring in computer engineering and managerial studies for undergrad, and then you returned to Rice Business to earn your MBA in 2005. Can you talk about, you know, choosing Rice twice and, maybe, the differences in experiences as an undergrad and as a business school student?

[00:56] **Brandy:** For sure, yeah. You've absolutely done your homework. Everything you said was spot-on. I'm originally from New York. I grew up in New York City, in Manhattan, on the lower east side of Manhattan. And so, just to put it out there, I had never heard of Rice. I got a

scholarship to Rice, an engineering scholarship. This would've been in the mid-90s, when there was a push for more women and more minorities to enter into the field of engineering. And so, at the time, I had very high math and science grades, high grades all the way around. And it was suggested to me that I consider engineering. And so, I didn't know what an engineer was. I had never heard of Rice. I had only been to Houston once in my life.

And so, I took a leap of faith. And it all worked out. But I am very grateful to the Posse Foundation, which is the scholarship that I received to enter into Rice. And so, Rice was the second ever Posse school. And they had the first engineering Posse. And so, that's how I started at Rice the first time.

The second time... so, that's a little bit of a story, too. I actually was working as a software engineer at Compaq. And so, when I say that I feel like I'm dating myself because Compaq was acquired by what's now Hewlett-Packard... And so, I was working in the suburbs of Houston out in Tomball, off of 249, for those folks that know the Houston area pretty well. I was working out there as a software engineer. And I figured, hey, I'm going to focus on the GMAT first, and then think about where to apply later.

And it just so happened that my GMAT instructor that was on the campus of Compaq at the time — and so, I really just had to take the elevator down to go to my classes after work — was a Rice alum by the name of George Webb. He works at Rice today, but he had a career as an attorney. But he highly suggested that I consider the Jones School. In my mind, I'm like, well, that would've thrown off my whole timeline. I didn't want to apply until next year. And so, long story short, he and a gentleman by the name of Peter Veruki, who was at the Jones School at the time in 2003, they planned together and got me at the Jones School. And so, I never looked back. And it was a great decision.

[03:04] **Christine:** What are some of the key takeaways from your experience at Rice Business that you use today in your role and really have used since then?

[03:12] **Brandy:** Let's see. So, there are quite a few takeaways, but I will start with communications. And so, my communications instructor was a gentleman by the name of Gale Wiley. We're still Facebook friends to this day, and so, keep in touch that way. But Gale definitely taught us a lot about public speaking. I have been, and still am, very much an introvert. And so, the Jones School really transformed me from someone who was very much an introverted technical software engineer to someone who was more comfortable speaking in public and taking a leadership role and not being afraid to speak up. I remember there was an

exercise in the Jones School where there was... you had to speak extemporaneously in communications class, and you never knew when you were going to get called on, you never knew what the topic was. And for me, that was almost like... to an introvert, that's like, "Oh, no, am I going to get called? I don't even know what I'm saying." But it really helped me to feel comfortable communicating whatever the message was, even if I wasn't prepared. And so, that was one of my key takeaways from a communication standpoint.

I think another thing was networking, so recognizing the importance of networking among the folks in your class, among the other year in your class, because at the time, there was a first and second-year class, making sure that you branched out to the executive MBAs, if any companies came to campus, that you were networking there and not being afraid to advocate for yourself.

[04:49] **Christine:** So, today, you are Vice President of Strategic Growth for Pluribus Digital. It's a technology firm based in Washington, D.C. Can you tell us a little bit about your current role and how you got there?

[05:00] **Brandy:** Absolutely. So, Pluribus Digital is a digital services firm based out of Arlington, Virginia, which is in the Washington, D.C. area. But we provide digital services to the government. And the easiest way to explain that is that if you have to go online to apply for a social security benefits or apply for anything pertaining to the IRS and taxes or veterans go online to apply for veterans benefits, and so any interaction between citizens or residents of this country and the government online is called a digital service. And so, we provide those digital services on behalf of the U.S. federal government. And one of the contracts that we support now is in support of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. And so, we support many of the systems that facilitate legal immigration. So, for example, refugees that come to this country. And so, we're really proud of our work with USCIS.

[06:03] **Christine:** There's a lot to that. And I would imagine, digital services involving the government, the last couple of years, have been even more important than ever, with all the COVID programs and everything that's been going on.

[06:16] **Brandy:** Absolutely, yeah, digital services has become really huge, I would say, in the past decade plus. But you're spot-on with the COVID benefits, for sure. I think that the veteran community is one of the best examples of a process that needed to be improved or the interaction or the experience, if you will, of the veterans interacting with the government has needed to be improved. And so, there's a coalition of firms that I helped to start up. And there

are about 28 of us now that formed the Digital Services Coalition or the DSC. And so, we really want to make sure that we put the experience of the user at the forefront when they are attempting to get services from the U.S. government.

But I wanted to circle back really quickly. You did ask me how I got here. And so, that's a whole nother story. I've mentioned that I didn't know what an engineer was, but I did know what a computer was from a very early age. The story goes that my mom did not want my older brother and I playing video games. And so, this is about the time when there was the Atari that came out. And so, again, dating myself with all these terms. She didn't want us playing the Atari. She didn't want us playing Nintendo. And so, she did say, "Hey, IBM came out with a PC. And so, I want you to learn how to use that." And so, she did buy us a couple of precursors to the IBM PC, which would've been the VIC-20 or the Commodore 64. And so, she puts these computers in front of us. And so, my brother would've been in the sixth grade. I was probably in kindergarten or first grade at the time. And so, my brother starts programming. And I'm watching him. And so, I'm learning how to program at a very early age.

Now, keep in mind, this is the '80s, before computers were in everyone's home. But my mother's vision was for one of her children, if not both of her children, to end up working for IBM, which I will say that IBM was the reason why I moved from Houston to the Washington, D.C. area. So, IBM did recruit me right out of the Jones School and transitioned me to where I am today, geographically.

So, when I went to Rice the first time, didn't know what an engineer was. And the question was, well, what discipline do you want to major in? And I didn't know anything about civil or mechanical. And so, computer engineering, yes, that sounds good because I know what computers are. And so, that ended up being a great choice for me. Got a career in IT. A Rice alum by the name of Russell Ross, who also went to Rice undergrad and also went to the Jones School, he helped to facilitate a summer internship for me at Compaq. And so, that really kick-started my career in IT, where I started working for Compaq, went to the Jones School. As I mentioned, IBM relocates me to the Washington, D.C. area to do public sector work. Ended up working as a management consultant for Accenture. And now, I've been with a string of small businesses for the past 10 years.

[09:19] **Christine:** So, I have to ask, when you ended up at IBM, was your mom proud?

[09:23] **Brandy:** Oh, yeah, she was beyond proud. I think she carried around my business card that had my name and the IBM logo on it. But yeah, she was ecstatic that I was working for IBM, for sure.

[09:35] **Christine:** So, when you think back to that time when you selected computer engineering, has your path been really what you've thought it might be, or not necessarily?

[09:44] **Brandy:** I knew that I was going to end up in a technical field. I knew it was going to be IT. I didn't know that it was going to be public sector. And so, that's an interesting twist because both of my parents were federal employees. My mom worked for the Department of Labor for about 35 years, something in that range, for a very long time. My dad was an FBI agent. And the FBI actually had relocated us. I was born in Washington, D.C., ironically. And the FBI moved us from D.C. to New York City in the '70s.

And so, it was a full-circle moment that I even ended up in public sector. And so, that was a piece that was unknown to me, that I would end up in the public sector, as well.

I think the other piece that was unknown, I mentioned that IBM moved me from Houston to D.C. to work in the public sector, and I'm thinking, okay, great, this is good. Most of my family, including my parents, have worked for the government. I know the government agencies. But my first project, they sent me to Vancouver, Canada. Then, they sent me to Sweden, to Stockholm, Sweden. Then, I'm in Bulgaria and the UK. And I'm doing public sector work, but in other countries. And so, that was the spin, the international spin, on my career that I could not have predicted.

The irony there is that I helped to start the International Club at the Jones School. And so, we had our very first trip to Monterrey, Mexico. We had our second trip to Paris and London. And so, completely sight unseen, starting the International Club, not knowing what my career was going to lie ahead, was just very interesting. So, I think everything in life happens for a reason. And sometimes, you have to be willing to go with the flow.

[11:39] **Christine:** Right, right, quite a journey.

[11:42] **Brandy:** For sure, yes.

[11:43] **Christine:** You are a subject matter expert on matters of global customs. Can you talk a little bit about what global customs are and how you became a subject matter expert in that area?

[11:56] **Brandy:** And so, that was my previous career with IBM and Accenture. And so, it's not something I do today, but I do remember it well. That is what facilitated my international travel, is working with customs agencies in other countries. And so, my first stint was working with Swedish customs. And I've focused on matters of cargo—so import-export, and the security around the import-export cargo in and out of a country. And so, it started with Swedish customs, continued with Bulgarian customs. Under Accenture, I did support UK customs, which is called Her Majesty Revenue and Customs, which I think everything is Her Majesty in the UK. And I did end up supporting U.S. customs, as well. But in supporting so many different global customs agencies, I was able to generate an expertise around cargo shipments and the containers that they come in and the vessels in which they come in and out of the country. And so, just gaining that knowledge, not just from a United States perspective, but from other countries, as well.

[13:06] **Christine:** And I'm sure that's become a growing field that's so important, just with the globalization of what we've seen.

[13:13] **Brandy:** I think so. And I haven't been involved since COVID, but I can only imagine that it's been exacerbated because of the supply chain issues and all of the considerations around that, as well.

[13:23] **Christine:** In your time as a woman and a minority in tech, can you talk about what changes and advances have you seen? You know, you even talked about, when you even decided to go into engineering, there weren't as many women. What changes have you seen in your time in the field? And what else do you think is critically important, moving forward?

[13:42] **Brandy:** Yeah, that's a great question. So, my purview starts in the mid-90s and so, call it, 25, 30 years. And in that time, I've seen a tremendous amount of change, for sure. So, I've gone from being the only minority female in a room to now coming across other minority females. I'd say, for women, there have been a lot more strides in terms of making sure that the pipeline is strengthened. And what I mean by that is that there are more little girls who can see themselves as engineers. There are more little girls who can see themselves as software developers. Because I think that was part of the problem a while back, is that no one really

pushed STEM fields for women or for children of color. And I think that that has changed tremendously.

And so, when you have someone who is six or seven years old that can see themselves as a civil engineer or a mechanical engineer or a software developer, then it becomes a lot easier for them to move along a path where they can... where they have a goal in mind. "I want to go to this college or this university and major in this type of STEM field." And so, they have a path that's almost laid out for them because they envisioned it when they were much younger.

[15:06] **Christine:** And I know, when you were at Rice, you... gosh, I was looking at the list you were involved in and helped, I think, found several organizations. Just kind of tell me about those experiences. I'm sure it's rewarding to look at those organizations and how they've grown.

[15:22] **Brandy:** Yeah. I mentioned one was the International Club. The other one was the Black Business Student Association. And I have to say that I've been blown away by the growth of the BBSA. It's what it's called, the Black Business Student Association. I was talking to a young lady by the name of Victoria Hill, who was a leader in BBSA, who recently graduated. And BBSA basically honored the founders of the organization. And so, it was myself and a few other Jones School graduates, as well. And when Victoria called me and I said, "Well, how many students are in the BBSA now?" And I'm pretty sure she said something between 70 and 80, which blew my mind because, when we started it back in 2000, and it's either two... I think it was 2005, I want to say we had less than 20 students in the BBSA. And so, to see an organization that you founded grow from 20 to almost 80 students is just phenomenal. It warms my heart. I really think that that speaks to the strides that the Jones School has made in terms of recruiting and retaining minority students. And so, that is a big deal for me.

[16:35] **Christine:** Definitely, that's incredible. You talked a little bit about what you've seen in the field, as far as growth with women and minorities. Would you have any advice for, you know, maybe Rice, but universities in general, in encouraging more women and minorities to pursue those STEM-related careers and majoring in those fields?

[16:55] **Brandy:** Yeah. From a university perspective, I know that Rice has a summer program for... I don't know if it starts at K, but in the K through 12 realm, where they expose students at a younger age to enter into STEM fields. And so, I would say, for any university, to really help to increase that pipeline that I mentioned previously, because I think that's where it starts, I think that it's difficult to have someone who never thought about STEM all of a sudden think about it



because they're in college. And so, you really want to catch them when they're younger. And I think, for a university or a college to have a summer program, not only introduces the student to STEM, but it introduces them to your campus. It introduces them to university life. They get to know what a classroom setting looks like at an institution of higher learning. They begin to understand what a professor is, as opposed to a K through 12 teacher. They begin to have a comfort level with, "Yes, I want to go to college. I want to be at a university. And oh, by the way, I probably have to declare a major, is what they're telling me. So, I would want that major to be something in the STEM realm." And so, I think it becomes very important for universities to begin that exposure early. I think it helps with recruitment, even for that institution, later on.

I think, from a parent perspective, it's very similar, exposing your child to a variety of things. It doesn't have to be STEM. I have three boys under 10, and I'm recognizing that they have very different personalities. So, STEM may not always be the path. Right now, I think I have a couple of STEM children, but very artsy music child in there, too. So, I'm not saying that STEM is the only thing, but just to expose your child to a variety of different paths and let them decide what they're most passionate about.

[18:55] **Christine:** And you spoke about finding those mentors and looking ahead and seeing someone who has pursued a career in STEM. Did you have a mentor or someone you looked up to? Or would you say it was your parents who were most instrumental in encouraging you to pursue, you know, computers and engineering?

[19:14] **Brandy:** There were a variety of people in my path that have affected my journey. It definitely started with my parents. You know, I mentioned the story of my mom putting the computer in front of me. My older brother definitely affected that path. But along the way, I would say that I had mentors at Rice who definitely encouraged me to keep going was the biggest thing. So, I came from a New York City public school. And while I had phenomenal grades, I was very involved at school, it did not prepare me for the rigors of Rice undergrad. And so, I struggled a bit. And so, the biggest push that I needed was to keep going. And I mentioned the Rice alum by the name of Russell Ross. He was absolutely someone who had a similar path as me as a student. And so, being able to meet with an alum who had a similar story, I'm thinking, okay, I can do this, too. There were definitely professors along the way. There were my support system, my friends on campus, who definitely pushed me to keep going.

But I think that's the biggest thing, is that you can get a student or a young person to a particular point. But when they meet something — a situation that is not ideal or negative or



adverse in some way — sometimes they need that extra push to keep going. And so, I've had, definitely, a group of people along my path who have helped to mentor me or be a part of my support system. And so, that includes my extended family. So, not just my parents, not just my brothers, but my aunts and uncles and cousins who have encouraged me along the way. And college roommates, they're very supportive, too.

[21:02] **Christine:** Yes. It takes a village, as they say.

[21:04] **Brandy:** Absolutely, yes. And I, for sure, had a village, both in Rice undergrad and at the Jones School, as well.

[21:10] **Christine:** Is there some particular advice you might give someone who's considering an MBA, whether they're a few years out or even doing... I did the Executive Program, so I had had some career experience. What advice would you give if they were considering that journey?

[21:27] **Brandy:** The advice that I would give to someone starting an MBA program is that you don't need to know exactly what you want to do post-MBA. And I'll speak from my experience, especially in the Full-Time Program. The Full-Time Program is one in which you have the opportunity to be completely transformed into a career that you may not have known anything about. So, I think, be open to who you can possibly be post-graduation. I think networking with your classmates is instrumental, for sure. I think be open to any of the lessons learned. And they're not all hardcore like finance and marketing. I mean, definitely absorb the hardcore information, but communication skills, social skills, logistics skills. I mean, that was huge for us, especially in the first year, when you have like 15 things due in a week and figuring out how to prioritize your life. So, there are lots of lessons learned. And so, I would just recommend that someone really lean into their Jones School experience.

[22:29] **Christine:** I agree. And so many opportunities to learn, and take what you've learned and go in a different direction. And I agree with what you said about not necessarily knowing what you want to do afterwards. And I think, even for the Executive Program, there's a lot of my cohort that made changes in different directions. And so, it sort of opens up the opportunities again to make those changes, and just such a diverse set of classes to prepare you for a lot of different options.

[22:56] **Brandy:** Absolutely, yeah. And you made me think of, when I said I started the International Club, I'm pretty sure one of the current students told me that there's an

international component that is required. And I think that's phenomenal because that was one... going to be one of my recommendations, was to make sure you do something from an international perspective. But I think it's required. And so, I'm super excited to hear that because I think that really changes your perspective to see how things are done in other parts of the world.

[23:24] **Christine:** Yes, absolutely, a Capstone project. Unfortunately, for our class, it was canceled due to COVID. We were supposed to go to Brazil. But for most of the classes, they are getting that experience and a lot of coursework in global strategy and recognizing the importance of that in the world we live in today.

[23:40] **Brandy:** Yeah. And I think a big piece of working internationally is that it puts your ego in check. When you have to work in a space where you may not speak the language, as was the case with me in Bulgaria, I don't even... my brain didn't even process the Cyrillic alphabet. You don't know how to get around. That is a very humbling experience. And so, when we interact with our international colleagues and friends that come to work in the United States, I think you will have a lot more empathy for that person in a professional setting.

[24:14] **Christine:** When you go back to campus, what, maybe, surprises you or amazes you the most? You know, there's been a lot of growth, I'm sure, since you were there both times.

[24:23] **Brandy:** Oh, yeah, there's been a tremendous amount of growth. And I've been pretty involved. I think there was a sliver of time when I had my children and I wasn't as active, but I'm currently on the Board of Trustees for the university. And so, I do go back a few times a year now. And I can see the progress. And it is amazing to see the growth of the campus. It's amazing to see the increase in rankings of the Jones School. Like, that blows me away from when I graduated. And it makes me proud to say that I went to Rice, that I went to Rice twice, that I'm a Jones School alum. I mean, all of these things, you just want to say, "Yes. Yes, that was me. I went there and helped to start this thing." And so, there's a sense of pride there.

But I am very pleased and very happy with the progress of the Jones School and the university as a whole. I think we've made a lot of strides as a university. I know we've had... the university as a whole has had the Task Force on Slavery to, one, uncover the founder's entanglement in slavery; and then, two, to see what our response would be as a university. And so, I think that we've made a lot of positive strides from that standpoint, because I know a lot of universities are in a similar situation where they're trying to figure out what to do. But in this day and age,

while you can't erase your history, you do have to acknowledge it and you do have to better understand how we can move forward.

[25:51] **Christine:** And as you look back and reflect on your experiences at Rice, is there a favorite experience that stands out in your mind from undergrad or Rice Business?

[26:01] **Brandy:** I would say favorite/funny is that I remember going into Rice Business and saying, "You know what? I have some really great friends from Rice undergrad. And I'm not really here to make any, like, close, close friends. But I'm just... you know, I'm going to go in and get my MBA, and then be out." So, I couldn't have been further from the truth. So, I have a really tight, great group of friends from undergrad, but I ended up getting another great tight group of friends from the Jones School that I still keep in touch with today. And so, my best friend, Alicia Ross, she's one of those people. She is now based out of Miami. But she and I have a group text with a few other folks from the Class of 2005. And so, just a really phenomenal, successful, humble group of folks from the Jones School. And so, for me, that's really funny that I did not think that I would go in finding any lifelong friends. And I was super wrong about that. So, that's always funny to me.

[27:04] **Christine:** A twice graduate and a twice finding that core set of friends, definitely. Is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked you about?

[27:13] **Brandy:** Oh, let's see. We've covered a lot. I think I would just double down on a few points, just to make sure that, at some point in your career, you have that international experience. Make sure you network, network, network. For those introverts among us, don't be afraid to get out of the box from a communication perspective. There were times in my life where I've avoided public speaking. And I'd say, don't do that. So, I just have that message for my fellow introverts that I think an MBA can really help to push you forward from a communication standpoint.

[27:45] **Christine:** Definitely great advice. And we want to thank you so much for taking time to speak with us on Owl Have You Know today, Brandy Hays Morrison, Rice Business Full-Time Class of 2005.

[27:57] **Brandy:** Thank you for having me.

[28:00] **Outro:** This has been Owl Have You Know. Thanks for listening. You can find links and more information about our guest, host, and announcements on our website,

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