

Sooner Nation

Leadership skills turn small-town girl into international entrepreneur

OU ALUMNI GAIL DAVIS

T

o say that OU alumna Gail Davis is a self-propelled entrepreneur with moxie is an understatement.

How else did a 15-year-old girl go from selling shoes in Altus, Okla., to founding an international speakers bureau in Dallas?

She took her innate, small-town work ethic and juiced it with leadership skills she developed at the University of Oklahoma, where she once noted that the football crowd in the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium was larger than the population of her hometown.

Her 1979 journalism degree and public relations major gave Davis the skills she needed, but it was the opportunity for leadership as Panhellenic president and as a President's Leadership Class member that led her to entrepreneurship. Given the responsibility of selecting a speaker for a campus women's leadership program, she chose psychologist and columnist Joyce Brothers, picked her up at the Oklahoma City airport and introduced her to the audience. That experience planted a seed.

Twenty years later Davis started her own speakers bureau. Today, Gail Davis and Associates (aka GDA Speakers) has a roster of 2,600 keynote and inspirational speakers from heroes and survivors to celebrities and policymakers.

"We create partnerships with our clients," she says. "Anyone can book a speaker. We work with our clients to create an experience."

Founding her own company was a step-by-step process.

The day after her OU graduation she went to work for EDS, Electronic Data Systems, a global technology conglomerate founded by legendary entrepreneur Ross Perot. As an events manager, she was told to find a speaker for a sales-recognition event who was more than just a great presenter.

The EDS chairman challenged her to find someone new and global, someone nobody had heard of and would never forget.

Davis had an inspiration while watching the movie "Alive" about a 1972 plane crash in the Andes that killed many Uruguayan rugby players and their families. She wanted Nando Parrado, the heroic survivor of that plane crash, to come and tell his story, but she could not find him. It was the era before Google and he was not listed with any speakers agency. Being persistent and resourceful helped Davis track down Parrado's phone number through the Uruguayan Embassy in Washington, D. C. He said no, he would not speak. It took her six months to convince him.

That speech, she says, was "a complete homerun" for him and for her. The corporate chairman told her, "Kid, you should retire. You will never outdo this."

Two years later, she was still aiming high when she left her secure, 20-year corporate career to start her own speakers bureau. She had one speaker, Nando Parrado, and she worked out of her home office while raising two small boys.

It was a risky move that got riskier when she ended a long-term marriage and suddenly her hobby job became the livelihood for her and her sons. "That will get you serious real fast," Davis says. She worked long hours developing a speakers bureau that is client-centered, matching the right speaker to each organization's needs.

Davis has provided speakers for corporations, associations, organizations and universities. Clients with a fundraising event want marquee speakers, names that drive people to buy tables and donate money. Some corporate clients want motivational speakers for sales kickoffs. Others want informational or inspirational speakers.

She has booked speakers in 44 states and 25 countries for events sponsored by AT&T to YPO (Young Presidents' Organization). Whatever the need, Davis' agency has them: authors, entertainers, Fortune 100 executives, phi-



After 20 years in the corporate world, Davis started her own speakers bureau with one speaker. Today, Gail Davis and Associates (aka GDA Speakers) has a roster of 2,600 keynote and inspirational speakers from heroes and survivors to celebrities and policymakers.

lanthropists, sports figures and community leaders. Her website lists a head-spinning array of topics — artificial intelligence, big data, futurology, leadership, work-life balance, domestic violence, women’s empowerment, politics, world affairs and much more.

Top-name speakers include a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; basketball legend Magic Johnson; Olympian gymnast Shannon Miller; authors Bob Woodward and Shawn Achor; women’s rights activist Shiza Shahid; political pollster Frank Luntz; and a couple of OU alums, including Eric Maddox.

Maddox is one of the heroes on her roster. He graduated with a 1994 degree in political science then joined the U. S. Army as an infantry paratrooper and reenlisted to become a Ranger and interrogator. He helped revamp the military interrogation technique, basing it on empathy-based listening

that led to the capture of Saddam Hussein. After leaving the military he adapted his technique from the battlefield to the boardroom. He is now an author, negotiator and motivational speaker who gives about 200 speeches a year.

“Gail is tenacious in getting us work,” he says. “Her leadership conveys confidence that, ‘We will get this done!’”

The Entrepreneurial Mindset

“Even when I was working for a large corporation, I had an entrepreneurial spirit. I thought I owned my own career. I knew what I wanted it to be and I knew I could get it,” Davis says. She believes entrepreneurs are dreamers with ideas, drive and vision. “Passion fuels them. Unpredictability doesn’t stress them; some thrive on that. Obstacles are challenges.”

The “trick” of a successful entrepreneurial spirit is the combination of confidence and vulnerability, she says. Davis

is a fan of research professor and author Brené Brown, especially on two topics: the power of vulnerability and the assumption that people have the best intentions.

When advising young people, and especially aspiring entrepreneurs, she tells them to be curious. “Be open to coaching and new possibilities.” Learn from every experience, even bad ones. “If something does not work out as you want it to, tweak it and move forward.”

This has never been more evident than in her creative approach to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The first time I heard ‘coronavirus’ it was because I had four scheduled events affected by it and I thought that was a lot,” she says. “At last count, it’s 149 events. I went through the ‘poor-me’ phase and then I had to shift into a much more strategic mode. I had to deal with reality, not what I wanted it to be. And that meant no live events.”

Davis says having to see her business in a different light was one of the best gifts she received during the pandemic. “Tough times make tough decisions really easy,” she says. “I’m in an industry that has an option—we can do virtual events. The creativity I’ve seen in my clients and my staff has been unbelievable.

“In some ways virtual events can even be better. If you go to a large fundraiser and you buy the less-expensive seats, you will probably be watching the speaker on the IMAG screen. Now, everyone has a front-row seat. It can also be more intimate. If your speaker is at home and their cat walks across their shoulders in the middle of the presentation, you feel more connected, not less.”

This problem-solving mindset has driven Davis to develop a custom software for speakers bureaus, which she says could help save time and cost. She is also excited about the idea of GDA holding its own events featuring speakers on its roster.

Early Influences

“We can learn from two kinds of people,” Davis says. “Those we want to be like and those we don’t want to be like.” She charted her career path with a few guideposts from her hometown and her university. Altus had no corporations and the women she knew were nurses and teachers, except Ruth Ferris, who was in charge of public relations for the school district. “I was highly impressed by the glamour of her job,” she says.

At OU, Davis was inspired by renowned administrators and professors: Anona Adair, then-PLC adviser, “who gave such perceptive advice in a gentle way”; Paul Massad, OU vice president emeritus and retired senior associate vice president for University Development, “who made everybody feel like



Nando Parrado and Davis celebrate the 20th anniversary of GDA. Parrado, a survivor of 1972 plane crash in the Andes that killed many Uruguayan rugby players, was the first speaker Davis hired. The success of that venture convinced her to start her own speakers bureau.

his favorite student”; and Chris Purcell, OU Regents vice president for university governance. “I watched her put hot rollers in her hair and call the babysitter for her children while preparing for a meeting,” she says.

Gratitude for her OU education has led Davis to mentor current students, says Ed Kelley, dean of the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication. In 2018 she was awarded the Gaylord Distinguished Alumni Award for her ongoing commitment to the college.

“Gail hires graduates as interns and for full-time jobs, connects with young alums and hand delivers admission packets to top high school prospects in the Dallas area,” says Kelley “Gail really goes the extra mile for us.”

Even hobbies keep her challenged. An avid runner and walker, Davis has hiked the Grand Canyon rim to rim and recently completed Spain’s 120-mile Camino de Santiago walk in seven days. “I’m very social during the day, so I love walking alone and listening to podcasts,” she says. “I’m definitely ready for another walking vacation. I’m considering Machu Picchu next.”

Whatever direction Davis decides to go, whether climbing ancient steps in Peru or expanding GDA, she will undoubtedly go that extra mile.

Connie Cronley is a freelance writer living in Tulsa.