

Written by Patricia Turnier

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Mrs. Bobbie L. Steele wears many hats. She is a former president and commissioner (for the 2nd district of Cook County, the fifth largest employer in Chicago, Illinois), a community activist, a former teacher, a mother and grandmother. Mrs. Steele comes from the Lawndale Community of Chicago by way of Cleveland. She was born on October 18, 1937, in Mississippi, to Mary and Abraham Rodgers. She is the oldest of seven siblings. In 1954, the same year as the Brown v. Board of Education case, which transformed the nation in terms of race relations, she graduated from Cleveland Colored Consolidated High School. Subsequently, she went to Alabama A. & M. College in Huntsville, Alabama two years

before moving to Chicago in 1956. Mrs. Steele worked many odd jobs (in Chicago) to gain tuition so that she could return to college. During her lengthy job search, she met and espoused Robert Steele (a loving relationship that lasted 52 years until his death in 2009). The marriage did not stop Mrs. Steele from losing sight of her goal. After the birth of her first two children, Steele went to evening school at Chicago Teacher's College and after ten years of schooling and five additional children she finally accomplished her objective by receiving a B.S. Diploma in Elementary Education in 1966. She was determined to complete her degree by studying every night between 3 and 6 AM while everybody was sleeping. Seeing that Mrs. Steele was passionate about helping to educate children, she thought later of becoming an elementary school principal. Hence, she enrolled in Roosevelt University evening graduate program, where she got a Master's Degree in Supervision and Administration of Education in 1983. In 1982, Mrs. Steele's teaching reputation and community organizing activities caught the attention of Congressman Harold Washington who wanted to run for Mayor of the City of Chicago. He picked Mrs. Steele as his running mate in the 24th Ward. When the late mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington was running for office, Mrs. Steele was one of the Deputy Registrars who gathered signatures. Thus, she became a major player in the Harold Washington mayoral campaign. Mrs. Steele didn't win the election for Alderman, but was appointed by Mayor Washington to the Commission on Women Affairs for the city of Chicago. As a member of the commission, Mrs. Steele could interact with females from all over the city and was soon asked by Cook County Democratic Women to run for Commissioner on the Cook County Board.

Mrs. Steele accepted the challenge, and with the help of Mayor Harold Washington was elected to the Cook County Board of Commissioners with a big victory (534, 000 votes) a position to which she was elected for 5 additional four-year terms, establishing her as the longest serving woman in the history of the Cook County government in that era. [On December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. This defiant act changed the nation forever and propelled the Civil Rights Movement. So, when Mrs. Steele was sworn in as a Commission in December 1st 1986, it was on an historic date. Moreover, she was the first and only female Cook County Commissioner inducted into the Chicago Women's Hall of Fame in 1993.]

During the 90s, Mrs. Steele was a candidate for Congresswoman. During the same decade, she was the Chairwoman of the Provident Hospital Committee in Chicago. John Stroger was the first African-American President of the Cook County Board on the historical date, December 1, 1994. Following the election, held in January 1994, Stroger appointed her chairwoman of the Finance Committee for the Forest Preserves, a position she held for twelve years. That appointment established her as the first and only woman to serve as chairwoman of a Finance Committee in Cook County. In July 2002, Mrs. Steele became the president of the National Association of Black County Officials (NABCO), an affiliate of the National Association of Counties (NACO). In addition, she was the chairwoman of the Deferred Advisory Compensation Committee of NACO. In 2006, Mrs. Steele made history by becoming the first woman President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners with a 3.2 billion dollar budget. Mrs. Steele became the first woman and thirty-second president to be placed on the wall of presidents,

among those honored before her.

Cook County in Illinois, which includes the City of Chicago, is the second largest one in America. Cook County's Board of Commissioners represents a legislative body made up of 17 commissioners who are elected by district for four year terms. The County has the main responsibility for the protection of individuals and property, as well as the provision of public health services and general governmental services such as assessments, collection and distribution of property taxes for eight hundred governmental units of Cook County as well as the maintenance of county highways. Furthermore, the county board creates policy and laws regarding public infrastructure, public safety and public health services.

Mrs. Steele is currently retired (she was a teacher for 26 years and politician for 20 years) but serves as an active member on three civic Boards: Illinois Counties Board of Directors, Illinois Women in Leadership Board of Directors and Lawndale Christian Development Board of Directors. She is also active in her church, United Baptist Church which is nothing new. While Mrs. Steele was pursuing her career goals, she was also active in her former church, Mt. Hebron Baptist Church, where she served as a professor in the youth department of the Sunday school and Baptist Training Union. In addition, she is involved in other organizations; among them, the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. as a Boule member. She is also promoting her book across America and she gives time for her family including thirteen grandchildren.

Mrs. Steele's son, Robert Steele, is Commissioner for the 2nd district of Cook County, Illinois, covering the West Side of Chicago; he took over the former position of his mother. Robert Steele was a community-outreach manager with the Chicago Park District and has been involved with local non-profit organizations and hospital boards for years. He has more than 30 years experience of public service in Chicago,

Mrs. Steele penned her memoir *Woman of Steele: A Personal and Political Journal*. It chronicles her experiences with racism, sexism, misogyny and her political struggles for her community. In the book, she also shares her feelings about people that she loved, such as the late Mayor of Chicago Harold Washington who endorsed her during her political quest. She also writes of her experiences in the company of historical figures like Dr. Martin Luther King (when he went to the West Side of Chicago) and well-known singers involved in the Civil Rights Movement like Mahalia Jackson who had one of the greatest voices in humankind.

The authoress also shares in her book the people who supported her during her political

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journey. For instance, when she was elected president of the Cook County Board, then Illinois Senator, Obama sent her a letter of congratulations. When Mr. President Obama was aiming for the senator position in 2003, he asked Mrs. Steele to endorse him which she did.

The book provides valuable information (about leadership, etc.) to people interested in a political career. Chicago, America's third largest city is home to the country's largest Black population. For years, it epitomized the power of big city "machine" politics with its influential Democratic party. The political landscape changed in 1983 with the arrival of Harold Washington, a local African-American politician who forged a coalition outside of the political mainstream and turned his campaign for mayor into a Civil Rights crusade for Black Chicagoans. The book covers all these major historical events. Her new memoir, *Woman of Steele*, tells the story of her migration from her humble beginnings in Mississippi to the underserved West Side of Chicago and her career in public service: twenty six years in Chicago public schools and over twenty years in politics.

Writing the book was not easy. Mrs. Steele started it in 2006 with her journal but had to stop in 2007 to devote all of her time to take care of her husband who was sick. In 2009, for six months she didn't do any writing and then began working on her book again in 2010. She completed it in November 2011. Judge Patrice Ball-Reed penned the forward of *Woman of Steele*. Mrs. Steele's husband supported her throughout her professional journey and wanted her happiness. Her mate, Robert P. Steele was very special and dear to her. She dedicated her book to him and to her late mother Mrs. Mary Rodges. This powerful memoir is a GPS for aspiring politicians and leaders in any realm. They will find valuable information.

In summary, Mrs. Steele managed to penetrate the well-established Chicago political system to become the longest-serving, elected African-American woman in the history of the Cook County government during her time. As mentioned, Mrs. Bobbie Steele was instrumental in the victory of Mr. Harold Washington. By winning the mayoral election, Washington became a symbol of Black hope and a national political figure overnight. It must be noted that Mrs. Steele is a trailblazer in her own right. She served as vice chairman of the Finance Committee and became the first chairwoman of the Forest Preserve Finance Committee (and the only Democrat). She was a Cook County Commissioner for the 2nd District from December 1985 till November 2006.

During her political career, among her many accomplishments, she was working to ensure minority and female participation in county contract bids. More specifically, she introduced an amendment to Cook County's Purchasing Ordinance, which established a goal of 25% participation for minorities and 10% for women on all county purchases. Moreover, she

Exclusive Interview With The Political Veteran: Bobbie L. Steele

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co-sponsored Cook County's Human Rights and Ethics Ordinances. Early in her career, Steele had a vision to establish an on-site daycare center for county employees. This daycare center was founded. Mrs. Steele was the first and only African-American woman to serve as chairperson of the Finance Committee of Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

The president tempore announced the result declaring that she received unanimous support to be the Interim President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. Thus, Mrs. Steele became the first woman in 2006 to be elected president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, a body which served 5.3 million people. She replaced John Stroger who had to resign because of health problems. In December 2006, Steele retired as interim president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. She considers herself to be a very spiritual woman whose faith has helped her throughout her personal and professional lives. Noteworthy, in spite of all her accomplishments, she didn't forget where she came from and she continues to give back to the community. Hence, Mrs. Steele occupied national leadership positions, chairing the National Association of Counties' Deferred Compensation Advisory Committee and serving as president of the National Association of Black County Officials. Locally, she was involved in the Women's Committee of Chicago, the Chicago Women's Center, Operation Brotherhood, the Aids Foundation of Chicago and so on. In 1996 Steele joined the United Baptist Church where she is an active member in Sunday school and the hospitality committee.

Here Mrs. Steele shares her expertise in the political realm and beyond. In addition, she talks about her memoir. Our readers will discover how eloquent and unassuming Mrs. Steele is. She has a strong character and knows how to defend her ideas. Mega Diversities noticed how pleasant it was to speak to this highly respected figure in the American political realm. The interview was conducted last spring and is the first foreign interview about her first autobiography.

[Women Of Steele is part of our Top 20 Books for Summer 2012: <http://megadiversities.com/summertop20books>]

Map of Cook County

Illinois' location in the United States

PATRICIA TURNIER, LL.M. TALKS TO BOBBIE STEELE M.A.:

P.T. I believe that being a teacher – your occupation for over 20 years -- is one of the most beautiful professions in the world. Name us one to three professors who have been important to you in your youth and tell us why.

B.S. There were three teachers who have been important in my life. When I was in high school I think of professor Pauline Homes. She was my biology teacher. I loved her charisma and how she carried herself. In addition, she mastered her domain. It impressed me to the point that I was thinking seriously to become a biology major. Earlier in my life, I can name Mrs. Adams. At that time, I was in 7th and 8th grades. She was very committed to education. I have to admit that she was tough. Every Friday, if we didn't know our spelling words, we had to line up and get spanked on our behinds. If it was today, she would have been fired with probably other consequences, but at the time it motivated me to get my work done. When I enrolled in Alabama College, another professor who had a great impact on me was Dr. Chambers, a biology teacher. He mastered his subject like an encyclopedia. He knew the text books from cover to cover. He didn't even need to open them to lecture. His memory was amazing. When we were at the laboratory and we did our experiments, he suggested afterward that we take a hamburger, for instance. He made us explain the trajectory of the hamburger in our body. This was his creative way to make us learn about anatomy. I ended up majoring in science.

P.T. What is interesting is you mentioned you love science but you didn't make a career in this field.

B.S. No, I didn't. I got married before I completed college. My husband wanted a family. So, we started right away after we eloped. I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She was followed the next year by another one. With my new lifestyle, I thought it was more apropos to transfer into elementary education. Seeing that I needed to work, it allowed me to be at home during the summer with my children. However, my love for science never faded.

P.T. I always strongly believe that there is no age limit to get an education. Without giving away too much from your memoir, you have a great example in your own family:

your mother, Mrs. Mary Rodges. In addition, you had the drive and determination to fulfill your dream of completing college in spite of marriage and the blessing of having five children at the time. Another excellent example that I can give in U.S. history is George Dawson (January 19, 1898 – July 5, 2001), the great-grandson of African-American slaves who learned how to read at the age of 98 and went on to study for his GED at age 103 without missing one day of school. What message do you have for people (of all origins) who are discouraged from pursuing an education because of vicissitudes but wish to do it?

B.S. Education is a lifelong process. Now more than ever, we are in the information age. The information is available at your fingertips. My Mother had a thirst for knowledge. She earned three master's degrees: in elementary education, education supervision and administration. All three graduate degrees were earned at Delta State College in Cleveland. I totally admire her accomplishments, especially at a time when it was much more difficult for women of color to make it. In addition, I really respect the amazing history of George Dawson who received his GED at age 103 because he had struggles different to mine and other people today.

P.T. The only words that Dawson could read to protect himself decades ago were *Whites Only*. He was probably traumatized and paralysed to learn how to read for a very long time even after the end of segregation.

B.S. Probably. Your mind is more vibrant early in life. Getting an education at his age, I am sure that he had to work twice as hard. He had great determination and his journey is definitely inspiring. So my message is "education liberates." It is important to improve yourself whatever life goals, whether it is for business, employment, etc. Never give up on your objectives. Quitters never win and the winners never quit. I have great regard for people who pursue their education because it offers you more opportunities and it opens the doors of the world to you. You are never too young to learn and never too old to do it. A friend of mine who is in her eighties takes piano courses for the first time in her life. It is a self-gratification experience for her and it allows her to keep her mind active.

P.T. Name us one to three political forerunners -- dead or alive -- you admire and tell us why.

B.S. One person that I really admire is the late former mayor Harold Washington. He was

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well-read and very articulate. His repertoire of knowledge was unbelievable. He climbed through the ranks of the political system. He was in the U.S. Congress and ended up being the mayor of Chicago. Washington was a master of making alliances. He had significant relations in various sectors of the government that he built during his political career. So, I was impressed by the fact that he was able to have a really great base. He loved people and got his energy from them. He beamed when he was around people. Often, he could talk to them like they were his best friends in the crowd when he was at meetings around town.

While Washington was in office, Chicago's mainstream political machine formed an alliance to fight all his attempts at political reform. Mayor Washington refused to compromise. He progressively strengthened his reformist coalition through his equal treatment of all ethnic groups within the city when it came to jobs, housing, and other progressive issues. This was among his greatest accomplishments and legacy. Unfortunately, shortly after winning re-election to a second mayoral term in 1987, Harold Washington suddenly died of a major heart attack in his office. This left several of his plans unfulfilled, but he will always occupy a special place in our hearts. Washington will inspire generations of politicians and will remain forever a symbol of hope.

The other person that I admire was John Stroger, the first African-American president of the Cook County, Illinois Board of Commissioners. The new Cook County Hospital was renamed the John H. Stroger, Jr. Cook County Hospital after him. Among many functions, he was appointed by former President Bill Clinton as a member of the Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations. He was a knowledgeable historian in politics and about African-American people. He impressed his audiences because he knew the history of diverse people: Irish, Italians and so on. He came from humble beginnings, but that didn't stop him from reading. He became a lawyer.

P.T. I believe that it is wealth to be knowledgeable. There is a difference between being poor in the mind (having tunnel vision of the world for instance) and being poor materialistically. There are offspring who lost big inheritance because they didn't have the knowledge to avoid mismanagement. As you said earlier, education opens the world to an individual.

B.S. Definitely! Stroger was one of the most humble persons that I ever met. If you had problems with him, it was important to confront him privately, otherwise you had to watch out [laughs]. He definitely had a positive lasting impression on me.

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The third person that I want to name is Shirley Chisholm. I think she was so courageous to run for the presidency (as a Democratic candidate), the second Black female in America to do so in 1972 (the first one was Charlene Mitchell for the Communist Party in 1968) and she had stamina. I know that you asked me three people and I don't want to name too many [laughs], but Barbara Jordan, the pioneering Congresswoman, was another one.

P.T. I was too young at the time, but in the seventies it was probably really hot to see a Black woman making her defense of the Constitution during the impeachment hearings of President Richard Nixon [laughs]. That was bold and daring. They are thinking about making a movie about her life.

B.S. Really?

P.T. Yes and it is possible that the Oscar nominee actress Viola Davis will play her part.

B.S. I admired her immensely. It would be wonderful if the movie becomes a reality. I would like to play a part in the film [laughs]. I got a call from her to congratulate me when I won in 1986.

P.T. Wow! What part in the movie would you like to play?

B.S. I would like to play the part when the president was impeached [laughs out loud]. This move was remarkable and she always stood out in my mind. I believe that she had charisma, knowledge and courage.

P.T. Can you name one to three people who have been instrumental in your political career?

B.S. One is Patricia Dixon. She came into my life when I started to run for the Cook County Board. I had heard of her. She ran for *committeewoman* of the First Ward as an independent Democrat. She didn't win. Her opponent was tough and I was impressed by her courage. When I started my campaign, we had never met; she just showed up of her own initiative. I was really moved by her great support and generosity in sharing her experience. We

started to work together. Her strategic planning was highly instrumental. She played a very important part in my political career and life.

The other person is Ertharin Cousin. She was appointed by President Obama as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture. More specifically, she was the executive director of the World Food Program from 2009 until last April (2012). She always has been committed to serve humanity by feeding the hungry and empowering the disenfranchised. She coordinated seventy countries in her program. I met her at the same time as Pat. She also got involved in my campaign of her own initiative. At the time, she has just graduated from law school. I was very impressed because she had “out of the box” ideas. I am very conservative, so she was a breath of fresh air. Her top-notch ideas put us over the top for raising funds. In 2006, when I became president she wanted to take a look at my speech for the inauguration. For my departure, she offered the same thing. She checked my resignation speech. She knew that the press would be all over me. She took charge of the media. She said at the time: “I am going to take two questions and that’s it”. I was impressed, she acted like a pro. Since the debut of my first campaign until the end of my political career, she has been there for me and we remained friends.

P.T. In your autobiography, the readers learn that as of the age of fifteen, your mother gave you the responsibility to manage the home. It must not have been easy to have big responsibilities at such a young age. However, would you say that this experience was instrumental in preparing, you among other things, to become in 2006 the first woman in America to be the president of the second largest Cook County in the U.S. which served 5.3 million people with a \$3.2 billion budget?

B.S. Yes, I do believe that early training gave me a platform for budgeting and managing. At the time, my parents found jobs outside of our town so they gave me the responsibility of the house. I had to do tasks which included budgeting and managing the groceries for instance. My mother sent the cheques and she trusted me. My mother always worked and very early in my life she taught me how to make bank deposits, etc. So when she left, I was able to implement and continue to put into practice what I learned from her. All this knowledge that I acquired allowed me to use it on a larger scale later in my political career.

P.T. You are the first and only female Cook County Commissioner inducted into the Chicago Women's Hall of Fame. How do you feel about this honor?

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B.S. I felt really great about it, especially when I know that there are other amazing women in our city who were honored the same year as me in 1993. I was very humbled that the women from the Commission selected me as one of the outstanding females in Chicago.

P.T. You managed to have it all. You had a long political career, you were married, you are a mother and a grandmother. Some people think to go far as a woman in politics you need to be involved in this domain when your children are already grown, or you have to make sacrifices such as not having children. What message do you have for females who are struggling to find balance in the main spheres of their lives, especially for the ones who are in politics?

B.S. I have to say that as my children grew older, I pursued my political career on my own. When I was elected, most of my children were grown, except two. Overall, I think women have to be very sure that they want to be in politics because it is demanding. However, it is possible to do this with the help of the family. I know several women who are in elected office and their children turned out to be successful. I believe it is a matter of time management and having a support system because there are moments when you will have to be in meetings where important decisions will be taken. At the same time, you have to find balance to be available for your children when you need to meet their teachers, etc. You also need to be there for them emotionally. I was very fortunate to have a great support system when I went to school. In addition, my husband and my neighbors were very supportive. My mate stayed home, so he was available to take care of the children. He was a great cook and very proud of it.

P.T. You were lucky.

B.S. [Laughs]. His mother taught him how to cook soul food, etc. He was from the South. He was the leader in my support system.

P.T. You were also lucky that you found a man decades ago who was not intimidated to be with a highly ambitious woman.

B.S. Absolutely! I was very fortunate that he didn't have these issues. For him, being with an ambitious woman didn't make him feel in any way less than a man. He also knew where I was coming from. I always believe that females have the ability to make decisions and can provide

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leadership. We see this all the time and we are 50% of the population of this country. So, I always believed that we have our say and we are entitled to have a voice. For women who want to embrace a political career, I suggest that before you make the decision to run for political office, you need to assess your situation. At first, you have to be sure that you really want this because as mentioned it is very demanding, even if it is rewarding. You need to have a clear picture of what you are getting yourself into. Some people get into office and realise that it is hard, they didn't fully assess the requirements of the job. Secondly, you need, as I said, to have a solid support system. You have to communicate effectively with your spouse (if you have one) and make sure that he is on board with you. As you said earlier, some men can become intimidated by strong and ambitious women. So, the males need to be understanding and supportive when their mate wants to embrace a political career. I would like to see more women seeking office because we need them.

P.T. You talk in your memoir about “the village” which helped you throughout your personal and professional lives. What does Black America need to do to retake “the village”?

B.S. I think we lost respect, support and trust for each other. We need to rethink our value system. Not that long ago, neighbors helped to keep an eye on children. Now, families living close don't know each other and do not have the right to say anything to these children. When I was raising my kids, I knew every parent on the block and they knew me. Our children played together. These parents were allowed to make sure my children behave appropriately or intervene when they acted out, likewise with me. We took the children on trips or camping with us. This is the village, this is part of what the village does. It is true when they say it takes a village to raise a child. Unfortunately, the village is gone. We need to reconnect as a family. I believe that it starts with respect for each other. I think there is a lot of violence in the world because we don't respect each other.

P.T. I believe it is also because there is intolerance of differences in culture, religion, etc. In addition, there is a quest for power and greed.

B.S. Absolutely! We have to go back to the core of loving each other, and our children need to learn that.

P.T. In your book, the readers learn that you met Dr. King. In your memoir, there is a nice picture of Dr. King with Rev. J. N. Wordlaw, your late pastor, who marched with him and

had a passion to uplift humanity. I think that Dr. King in his classic book Strength to Love provides a powerful message about the importance of love in humankind.

B.S. Definitely! A continuing conversation about our core values must occur and needs to be embraced. This is how the village can be rebuilt.

P.T. How do you see the role of the church for this rebuilding?

B.S. [Silence]. The church is fragmented. It is not unusual to see four churches on one block. Again, a real conversation is required. I am part of a group which tries to generate some thoughts about how we can recreate the village. The walls are all torn down like it states in the Bible and the city needs to be rebuilt. In the Bible, it is about Jerusalem and here I am talking about the village of Black America.

P.T. Earlier, you were talking about lost values. I believe there is a laissez-faire attitude in dressing properly, not just in Black America but in America as a whole also. I wasn't born in the sixties but when I watch footage of marches and sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement, I saw how the people were proud of their attire: suits with ties and so on. You could see the respect they had for how they presented themselves to the world and how they carried themselves. I don't know what happened with the dress code, etiquette, etc. over the last decades.

B.S. I don't either. I am from the Old School. Men and women should dress appropriately and impeccably on every occasion. To do this you don't need to be wealthy. You can learn how if you really want to. Your attire says a lot about you. I spoke recently to a group of females who served time in penitentiaries and they are trying to integrate into the society. I gave them information about job interviews by explaining that you don't have two occasions to make a first impression. It is very important how you present yourself physically to the world. This is the reality for everybody. When you are looking for a job, your attire must send the message to your future boss that you are truly looking for employment and that you are not going to a club [laughs]. I think this is what happened with dress codes, etiquette and so on. There are people who value freedom highly and it has come to a point that they forget their identity and who they are representing.

P.T. As mentioned earlier, in 2006 you were the first woman to be elected president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. In addition, you became the longest serving African-American woman in the history of Cook County. What are the most important lessons you learned during your political career, and what are the unwritten rules you discovered in your domain?

B.S. I learned that you have to listen before you speak. Many people want to be heard first, I suffered from the same symptoms when I was a novice [laughs]. However, as I matured I learned to listen to my counterparts and read where they were coming from. I learned how to respond to their needs. We have two ears and one mouth; there is a reason for that, it is highly important to listen. You need to build a strong track record of hearing the population's strategic concerns and finding creative solutions. It is also imperative to master your dossiers and the current issues. You have to know what you are talking about and what is happening in the world. In other words, you cannot have tunnel vision, you need to have a base of knowledge. When I was in office, I read at least three newspapers before I went to work. I made sure that I knew what was happening in Black America and the mainstream. I read progressive and conservative newspapers. My staff also did research on several issues and their work was instrumental in helping to assess different situations with a broad vision. This is how you make your place by giving valuable and thorough information to go forward.

In the beginning, I was overlooked, but I expected it because I was in a male dominated environment. I didn't give up and I made sure that I knew my craft. When I opened my mouth, I spoke with wisdom and confidence, not with hostility to someone who overlooked me [laughs]. It happened sometimes that I went to the bathroom to pray to keep my sanity. I got down on my knees and asked God to help me to say the right things and help me to do the right things by making sure that I represent his people well. When I was back, I felt good and strong to face any situation. I learned how to work with the members of the board. All egos need to be checked at the door to allow productive and effective conversations to take place.

I would like to add that you don't go into politics for the sake of picking a fight. One of the main unwritten rule is you don't use your position to promote your self-interests. Do not become full of yourself because of your title. People will remind you of this. You have to remember that you are in your position to serve the public. To finish, in politics, you may need to protect yourself with a coat of iron [laughs out loud].

P.T. Studies show that many adults who have high positions where it is required to work with a team had siblings and/or participated in team sports. For instance, in the book *What Makes the Great Great*

by Dennis Kimbro, a survey about people from Black America who had the highest positions in the Corporate world was conducted. Most of these people had siblings. It seems that it is more seldom that an only child becomes a CEO because he/she didn't learn at an early age to interact with several people, especially if she/he was not part of team sports.

B.S. This is really interesting, and I believe it does make a difference. With siblings you learn leadership and sharing. In my work, I wasn't limited to having interactions only with people of my party. I spoke to everybody whether they were a Democrat or a Republican. I made sure that I established a personal relationship with the people that I had to work with. It is very important. On a regular basis, I made sure to greet the new board members by asking them if I could help them, for instance. Over the years, I gained a lot of respect. On my departure, a Republican told me that he enjoyed my personality and thought that I was pleasant to work with. This was a great compliment and I do love getting along with people.

P.T. I think that everything can be said in a respectful way even when we disagree. This is probably what he felt about you, even if you were not in the same party as him.

B.S. Absolutely! My former pastor told me one time, "Commissioner, you can cut a person into small strips, throw your arms around them afterwards and love them to death [laughs out loud]." Seriously, I would not speak to people in a harsh way; however, when it was required I had to say the truth. Most of the time, I did it privately and it didn't mean that I disliked the individual as a person. My former pastor retired quite a while ago and he calls me every week. We often joke about our conversation I just spoke about.

P.T. During your race for Alderwoman of the 24th Ward in the 1983 mayoral primary, you penned in your book that the citizens of Chicago who supported you were facing danger by not endorsing a candidate from the Regular Democratic Party. Can you elaborate on the dangers they were facing?

B.S. Yes. The 24th Ward is located on the South Side of Chicago. There are 50 Wards in this city. Many are heavily Democrat and 24th Ward was probably the most Democrat in the city. The Democratic Party relies on it to get many votes. Some people felt threatened by a candidate who was not from the Regular Democratic Party. The citizens who were supporting this candidate got city violations for their houses, their water could be cut off, etc. Some people even lost their lives. There was a member of the Democratic Party who wanted to break away to

become Independent and he got killed in his office. In the 24th Ward, there was a minister who supported a candidate not selected by the party and the church started to receive city infractions. This is the kind of danger we were exposed to. When I ran, I was not aware of all the schemes going on behind closed doors. A sheriff came into my house, sat in my kitchen, and told me I was running against a bear. I responded to him that I was a tiger [chuckles]. I believe that my bravery helped me to not become a target of evil things which might have happened to me. In addition, I ran at the same time as Harold Washington, and there was a lot of enthusiasm. The people who supported him did the same for me.

P.T. I am really happy that you are sharing all of this with our readers. Bold people like you, Rosa Parks, and so on definitely paved the way. You are a trailblazer.

B.S. If we don't fight the status quo will remain. Harold Washington and I, during the campaign, created an organisation formed of policemen, bus drivers and so forth. We went to the bear office [laughs] to deliver this message: "if I get one scratch on me, they will come looking for him." This is the kind of situation I found myself in.

P.T. I would be curious to know if Harold Washington received death threats.

B.S. I am pretty sure he did. He was always surrounded by security. There were African-Americans who volunteered to be among his security guards during his campaign. I know that other candidates from other wards got bombs in their office or broken windows and so on. Fortunately, this never happened to me.

P.T. You are really courageous.

B.S. I always felt that there was a hedge of protection around me. The protection came from people that knew me and my family. They knew what I stood for. I could walk being fearless. However, it was important for my family to be safe and I would never do anything which could put them in jeopardy.

P.T. I know that Shirley Chisholm received death threats at least three times.

B.S. Yes. The threats were not isolated just to me. Whenever you move up in office and you seem to be penetrating a territory where people are afraid to lose the power that they think they have, some feel threatened by that and can commit negative acts.

P.T. You were a major player in the campaign of the late mayor Harold Washington. You said to the media: “Until the advent of Harold Washington, there were very few African-Americans who were included in the political realm. You just could not penetrate the system.” You saw the progression of how far a Black politician can go in the U.S., and now there is an African-American President. Nevertheless, in the current election, none of the candidates is female. Moreover, presently there are no African-American females who occupy high positions in politics, such as being a governor or a senator. So, there are barriers in terms of gender and ethnicity. What do you think it will take for a woman, whatever her origin, to break the remaining glass ceilings?

B.S. WOW, I thought that Hillary Clinton would win the last time. Since 1872 with Victoria Woodhull from the Equal Rights Party, women have tried to become a U.S. President. So, it is about time to see it happen [laughs out loud]. I believe that to break the glass ceilings, females need to be supportive of each other financially and otherwise. We have great female leaders in our country, such as the Congresswoman of Illinois, Jan Schakowsky, Tammy Duckworth (who lost her legs and got a damaged right arm during the Iraq war), the former Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs in the Department of Veterans Affairs who launched her campaign to run in 2012 for the re-drawn 8th Congressional District of Illinois. We have to let people in high positions know that we need a seat at the table, because if we don't have a seat there we won't be part of the menu [chuckles]. Women need to continue to raise their voice to let the world know that we are equal partners. We are part of the half of humanity and for progression the playing field needs to be level. We give birth to them [laughs] and our votes count, so our voices need to be heard. Genders have to be equal partners in politics, in the workplace and so on. Equal pay is a must in every realm. Females also want to serve humanity. I believe that we will continue to make gradual breakthroughs. On a regular basis, we hear a new glass ceiling being shattered by a woman, there is hope. We have to remember that it hasn't been 100 years that we had the right to vote. We came a long way but not far enough. Women have power and should use it. When people don't recognize females as equal partners they need to challenge them at the voting booths for instance. When I began my political career, at some point a man asked me: “Your husband lets you do this?” [chuckles]. I responded: “Excuse me, but I don't need anybody's permission.”

There are not enough women in the Senate and the Congress because we don't see 50% of representation of the female gender. I believe that there is not one particular answer to get to

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the top positions, there are many factors and venues to consider. Basically, everything comes through collective effort to encourage women to pursue their leadership path and stay involved in the area of their choice.

P.T. About top positions regarding African-American females, these occupations have been filled: Fortune 500 chief executive, A-list movie star, Secretary of state, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Lieutenant Governor and Senator. What is your assessment of current African-American females regarding their progress in different realms in top jobs?

B.S. There are not enough African-American women in key positions, in other words in top jobs. The first and only female African-American to date who became a senator is Mrs. Carol Moseley Braun is a good friend of mine and endorsed my book. She was also the U.S. Ambassador to New Zealand after she lost the second election in the Senate. Again, there is a scarcity of Black females in top positions. Our votes are powerful and we need to use this means. Everybody has to be involved, even if you are retired or lost office. You can't sit and wait for things to happen. It is a lifelong journey, especially for African-American women. Someone paved the way for me. I cannot forget that and I have the obligation to help other people. So, as long as I have breath in my body I will do whatever I can to help females and poor people. Furthermore, it is important for future generations to go to school, to get prepared to be in service, especially now that we are in the information age. Women need to understand that courage is a must to take the torch. Personally, I encourage them and I invest a lot of time in young people. I give scholarships from the proceeds of my memoir. The money will go to my foundation, the

Women of Steele Foundation (WOSF)

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P.T. In your book, you discuss the need you had to develop a thick skin as the first female president for the Cook County Board of Commissioners. Do you think it is a myth or a reality that to make it in a high level position (in politics, corporate America...), a female needs to adopt male characteristics? Moreover, feel free to share with us the leadership style you adopted during your political career.

B.S. I can't stand women who adopt male characteristics [laughs]. Just to be counted as part of the men's club, some elected females like to adopt male standards to move up the ladder. I don't believe that you have to use masculine traits to be accepted. In other words, you don't have to become one of the boys. What is important is maintaining your self-respect, your integrity and knowing what you are talking about. You have to know for whom you are working,

why you are working for him/her and never forget who you represent. You have to present yourself as someone who has character and knows what you stand for. This is how you make your mark. It is possible to be successful without compromising your femininity. For instance, at one time, only private hospitals were built and the change was done under the leadership of John Stroger, the president who was in office before me. He worked so hard to make it a reality. He talked in many places in the country about health care and poor people. He wanted a hospital which would be accessible to people who are socially disadvantaged. He was very committed to this issue. He came from humble beginnings. When the public hospital was founded, I thought it should be named in his honor. I went to each board member and asked their opinion about that. Some people thought that you give names to a building when the person is dead. I reminded them that there are well-known people who receive this honor when they are still alive, such as the Thompson Center, the State building (near my county office) named after the former governor at the time. So, I continued to meet board members to discuss all this. A vote was taken later and every single county commissioner signed on to this legislation. It was unanimous. So, my main leadership style is to have a relationship with the people that I have to work with. It is important for them to have the opportunity to have their input. You must listen to their objections if they have some, and find a way to have a consensus. In other words, don't push things down their throats. It is a question of team cooperation and mutual respect. So, it took time to see the changes we had to bring in the proposed law before it was adopted. It is our government, it is not mine or anybody else's.

My leadership style was also always related to preparation and research. I always made sure that I knew what I was talking about. I analysed issues from every angle and expected questions that I was ready to answer. Moreover, I have always been a team player by working on common issues. If people look at my record, not one member in the legislation that I put before the Cook County board was ever defeated. This speaks volumes.

P.T. We learn in your autobiography that since your retirement, you counsel young children and you volunteer on three Civic and community Boards. Can you elaborate on that?

B.S. I served on the board of directors of *Illinois Women in Leadership*. It is an organization which trains females to run for public office. I share with them my experience in the political realm. I tell them how I overcame hurdles. I also work with *Illinois County Association*

. I am on their board of directors where I serve on the scholarship committee. I reach out to young people who have the criteria for the scholarships and I help them with the required paperwork. This year, we have 38 students who applied and we offer ten scholarships. In addition, I work with the *Lawn Dale Christian Development Corporation*

. I am a member of their board and I am a chairwoman for building a vocational school in our city. This establishment will teach arts (it will provide afterschool art programs for teenagers from 14 till 18), technology and medical services. In my church, I give several scholarships. I also counsel young people in the church. In my community, every child on my block whatever the age knows my name and where I live. They know that I am there for them if they want guidance.

P.T. What message do you want the public to take away from your book?

B.S. I want the public to take away that there is a benefit for everyone to be prepared for what lies ahead. There are many opportunities out there in different venues. Preparation results in opportunities. So, get yourself prepared and keep your eyes opened. I also want the readers to know that success is progressive. It doesn't happen overnight, but with persistence, dedication and boldness. Even when some people become successful, you see their victory is ephemeral because they stagnate by not continuing to make additional efforts and perfecting their craft. Most of the time, in any realm, people have longevity by continuing to evolve in their domain.

My hope for the book is that it will also help us to move to another level in our thought process, and that is to be inclusive of current history makers, not waiting until they are dead to start giving them credit. Furthermore, until the advent of Harold Washington, there were very few African-Americans who were included in the political realm. You just could not penetrate the system. I penned my memoir because I think that history needs to be told in the voice of the person who penetrated the system. I experienced hardships and successes throughout my career, which inspired me to write my political journal, in order to tell my own story.

Women of Steele gives an inside look at my journey from my early farm life in Mississippi, my ordeals as a teenager, my drive to fulfill my dream of completing college. As mentioned, I accomplished my goals in spite of marriage and the blessing of my seven children.

The principal message that resonates in my book is that you can achieve and generate resources that are not in plain sight and win most battles fighting the "good fight," hanging fairness and equity high on life's banner while standing in the corridors of power on the right side of moral and ethical issues.

P.T. What advice do you have for females who want to follow in your footsteps in politics?

B.S. As I said before, make sure that it is something that you really want to do. Public service for me was a labor of love. Whatever the realm you want to espouse, you have to enjoy it. It cannot be a dreadful situation because you won't do your best. Don't go into public service for the money, the prestige or the honor, but because you want to accomplish something of substance for the benefit of the population. I avidly believe in politics for the people by the people.

For novices, you can volunteer, for instance, for the party of your choice. That way, you get valuable experience and it is a great way to build a solid network. In Chicago, I became involved as a political volunteer at the beginning. Although encouraged to begin a political career of my own, I actively maintained my occupation as a volunteer, helping to promote the campaigns of politicians I passionately supported. You gain rich experience by doing this.

To finish, my book discusses the need I had to develop a thick skin as the first female president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. Little by little, I was able to accomplish everything I set out to do during my term as president, despite some setbacks. So, women can take advice from my experience in my book.

P.T. What message do you have for young people who want to embrace a career in politics? In addition, what are the main pitfalls they need to avoid?

B.S. It is important to have a vision but you can't just sit on it without the proper planning process to bring that vision to fruition. It is not enough to have a dream, you need a plan and to do the work it takes to concretise your objectives. So, the message I want to convey to young people is to be prepared, work hard and do not make excuses. Find out if it is really what you want to do. Volunteer with elected officials, it will give you a concrete idea about politics and you will discover if you are made for it. Make sure that you learn as much as you can in the political domain. The pitfalls are about not being prepared, not knowing what you are getting yourself into, not getting involved or not knowing what you really want. Some people will give an excuse that they don't have money. Money is not everything, and it can get you into trouble if you don't know how to manage it properly. Again, do not expect things to happen overnight. Work at what you want to become so that when you reach that goal you are capable of staying there until you are ready to leave.

P.T. You covered earlier a little bit the subject regarding the scholarships you provide. Talk to us more about your organization, the Woman of Steele Foundation (WOSF).

B.S. The foundation is headed by a director, a president, a secretary and a treasurer with an advisory committee composed of 90 members. All kind of activities are organised, such as oratory contests, fundraisings for females with the objective of guiding them and getting them engaged to become productive citizens.

My foundation provides college scholarships to students who are pursuing careers in public policy, political science, and/or community development. To that end, Woman of Steele Foundation was established. All the profits from my book will go to WOSF to sponsor a scholarship for high school graduates who want to embrace a career in public policy, community development, environment protection and/or female issues.

P.T. To finish, do you have a message for the worldwide readers of *Mega Diversities*?

B.S. The ones who will read the book will find it inspirational. It is a template for people considering a run for public office. It is a history book which talks mainly about politics in Chicago. They will learn about the journey of a woman who came from humble beginnings and educated herself to break through professionally. The book is also about a wife who stayed with one husband for 52 years, a mother who raised seven children who all succeeded in life, and a grandmother. My memoir is about an ordinary person who accomplished extraordinary things. Since my youth, I aspired to become a strong Black woman who achieved academic success with the heart to give back to the community. I set out to get good grades and conducted myself like a professional lady. In the words of my friend Rev. Jesse Jackson, "If your mind can conceive it and your heart can believe it, then you can achieve it."

P.T. Thank you for this great interview. Your book, a page turner, is a legacy that you are giving us. It was an honor to interview you!

The book is available on www.amazon.com , .ca, www.barnesandnoble.com and www.bobbiesteele.com .

An Excerpt of Woman of Steele (p. 169-170):

"President Barack Obama's emergence as the forty-fourth President of the United States provides a direct inspiration to my foundation's work of helping young men and women achieve their dreams. It is very gratifying to know that one of the most defining experiences in President Obama's professional life is anchored in his community organizing work here in Chicago.

I was jubilant and profoundly moved when on November 4th, 2008 I was among the estimated 240,000 people who gathered in Grant Park to greet the President Elect, Obama. In the midst of that excitement, I answered my Blackberry to receive a personal electronic message of thanks for my support. The message went on to say that he would be coming onto the stage in about five minutes to announce his victory. That same message probably went to thousands of people who sent donations or helped in some way in the election, but that message was personal to me. In that moment, I thought about the expanded ability for people to participate and be engaged in the political process. It is an asset to all of us.

After that call, I reflected with pride on a much earlier interview with Barack Obama as he was seeking my endorsement for his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2003. He was straightforward and I felt a sense of sincerity and determination in his presentation. Because of our mutual interests in helping others, we connected. I endorsed him and even volunteered to work in his campaign.

When I was elected president of the Cook County Board, President Obama sent me a letter of congratulation. I believe that we are all a part of a great new era and that we all have a journey and a path that we must

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follow. No matter how difficult or challenging the events, we can make a better America.

Let us move forward together—the hard work and victories are ours to share."

1 Demographically, according to wikipedia.org as of the 2010 Census, the population of the Chicago's county was 5,194,675, White Americans made up 55.4% of Cook County's population; non-Hispanic whites represented 43.9% of the population. Black Americans made up 24.8% of the population. Native Americans represented 0.4% of Cook County's population. Asian Americans made up 6.2% of the population (1.8% Indian, 1.2% Filipino, 1.2% Chinese, 0.7% Korean, 0.3% Vietnamese, 0.2% Japanese, 0.8% Other). There were no Pacific Islander Americans. Individuals from other races made up 10.6% of the population; people from two or more races made up 2.5% of the county's population. Hispanics and Latinos (of any race) represented 24.0% of Cook County's population.

2 Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483.

3 Charlene Mitchell ran against Moynihan for U.S. senator in New York in 1988 but did not succeed.