

Vikki L. Pryor, president and CEO of SBLI USA Mutual Life Insurance Company, at the grand opening of the company's first Customer Center in the continental United States on May 21, 2004. The center is located in the Walden Galleria Mall in Cheektowaga, New York.

BY MARA MCGINNIS, B.A. '97

During the course of an hour-long interview with Vikki L. Pryor, J.D. '78 & B.A. '75, in her sunny midtown Manhattan office, this president and CEO of a major American insurance company quotes many women who have been influential to her—Maya Angelou, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Martha Stewart and, most importantly, a woman with a third-grade education named Marie Nesbitt.

Nesbitt, who was Pryor's maternal grandmother, continues to inspire Pryor at every life turn. From raising her 16-year-old son to running the \$1.4 billion SBLI USA Mutual Life Insurance Company, Pryor uses the lessons she learned from this larger-than-life woman.

"It's not really something you learn in business school," she says, in response to a question about her management philosophy and how, in less than five years, she was

able to lead a major turnaround of a declining 64-year-old company. "It's something I learned at my grandmother's knee in the kitchen," she explains. "You can tell someone how to peel potatoes. It's different when you say, 'I'm going to show you how to peel potatoes and we're going to do it together.'"

Pryor, who appears younger than her 51 years, arrived at SBLI USA as president and CEO in 1999. "It was a very roll-up-

your-sleeves environment and I was willing to roll up my sleeves," she says. "I think people here liked that, so they were willing to roll up theirs." What she doesn't talk about is spelled out in her bio: She guided the creation of a \$12 million technological platform that transformed the company into a financial services firm with a leading edge e-commerce strategy.

Clifford Miller, who has served on the board of directors of SBLI USA for 15



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Pushing for the positive

Corporate CEO Vikki L. Pryor, J.D. '78 & B.A. '75, offers colleagues and friends energy, enthusiasm and lessons learned at her grandmother's knee

years, has been its chairman since 1997 and was one of the people responsible for hiring Pryor to lead the company. Miller, who also is chairman, president and CEO of Ulster Savings Bank, headquartered in Kingston, New York, remembers Pryor captivated members of the board and beat out three other finalists—all of whom were men, he notes. “She was very articulate and had a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. I actually came away thinking that she was too good to be true.”

But Pryor has lived up to that first impression. She is utterly and completely invested in everything she does, according to her friend Maryann Coffey, former executive director of the New York National Conference for Community and Justice. Coffey notes that she hears SBLI USA ads on the radio and realizes it’s the CEO herself doing the voiceover.

Under Pryor’s leadership, the company, which offers a range of financial services to the “people who make America work,” has become a viable organization, according to Miller. “She’s not just about business, but about serving a need and an underserved market in this country.” That market, he explains, is America’s diverse populations—women, African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos, among others. In fact, SBLI USA now is a national bilingual operation and recently opened state-of-the-art Customer Centers in Puerto Rico and in suburban Buffalo’s Walden Galleria Mall. A third center is planned for Chicago next year.

Miller recalls that when Pryor first took over, he introduced her to many people in the banking industry. “In my introduction I would say, ‘This woman’s credentials include C.P.A., J.D. and M.B.A.; the only degree she doesn’t have is an E-G-O.’”

This humility is certainly clear when listening to Pryor tell her life story. She gives much more credit to others than she does to herself for her success, attributing nearly every positive quality she possesses to something her grandmother, Marie Nesbitt, instilled in her. “She demonstrated to me the power of self-determination,” explains Pryor.

“She didn’t say to me, ‘Vikki, self-determination is important.’ She lived it. And because she lived it, I didn’t have any other choice but to embrace that.” Also influential to Pryor were UB law professors Deanne Siemer and Virginia Leary, along with Keith Henry, a professor in the African American studies department, who helped her grow intellectually, she says.

“In my classes I strayed very readily beyond the black world into broader human experience and Vikki was receptive to that,” states Henry, who recalls Pryor’s “capacity, drive and brisk charm” as an undergraduate nearly 30 years ago. “Our outlook centered on moral and social issues more than on specific data and was ultimately about the virtues of learning and habits of thinking,” he says. “Vikki was energetic and focused, but given also to purposeful reflection, and my classes tended to cater to students of that disposition.” Pryor notes that she kept in touch with Henry for many years after leaving UB.

Not everyone in her life has been encouraging, however. Pryor admits she has faced personal obstacles, as well, though she hesitates to go into detail. “I’ve had a lot of people tell me, ‘You’ll never make it.’ And I’ve had some of the closest people to me try to prevent me from making it. Thankfully, that was balanced with other people who have been inspiring to me. I think if you want to grow, if you’re intellectually curious, if you want to change or make a difference, you will encounter resistance.”

As for her UB days, Pryor remembers hearing, for 50 cents a show, a then-virtually unknown Spyro Gyra and the reggae artist Jimmy Cliff at the UB student union, then on the South Campus. Pryor worked during her years at UB and studied history as an undergraduate. She rode her bike to campus from her home on Flower Street in Buffalo’s University Heights district. In those days, she says, the university required a license plate for one’s bike. Now, more than 25 years later, that license plate is still attached to her bike. “It has ‘SUNY/AB’ and my number: 1727,” she states nostalgically.

Pryor’s distinguished career path includes jobs as senior vice president at Oxford Health Plans and at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, a director at Allstate Life Insurance Company and a tax lawyer for the Internal Revenue Service. Despite her history of demanding, high-powered jobs, Pryor maintains that parenting has been among the most challenging—and rewarding—of all her positions. However, balancing motherhood with her career is no different than what any mother faces, she says, noting that all mothers are “working mothers.” Her son, Daniel, a high school sophomore who plays football and basketball, is start-

ing to look at colleges (“I think UB is on his list,” she shares).

Pryor’s workday starts around 5 a.m. when she walks Domino, her Dalmatian, outside her home in Westchester County, and then commutes into Manhattan. She can get 10 to 150 e-mails daily and likes to answer each one the same day. Her “number-one favorite thing to do,” however, is to interact with the staff at SBLI USA. She notes that’s part of the reason she’s often late for meetings.

Whether it’s casually or formally, Pryor’s words, in turn, have an impact on others. Many who have heard her speak rave about her ability to inspire a crowd. For her part, her friend Coffey notes Pryor speaks publicly with tremendous compassion and warmth. “Her talks connect with the needs of the audience, rather than furthering her own interests,” says Coffey.

Pryor’s impressive list of awards and personal philanthropic efforts includes the establishment of a scholarship for UB law students, named for her grandmother. “I could have done it in my own name, but I feel it’s important to look back to the source. I am hoping the scholarship will encourage others to identify people in their lives who have helped to shape them,” she says.

So far the annually awarded \$5,000 “Marie Nesbitt Promise Prize” has been bestowed on three female African American students during their second year of UB law school, based on their first-year performance. Sara Valencia, the 2004 winner, says that receiving the Marie Nesbitt Promise Prize is a tremendous honor and that she has had “the distinct pleasure” of meeting Pryor. “She is a warm, pleasant person,” Valencia says.

“Vikki has a magical way of helping people reach their potential,” adds Alan Carrel, vice dean at the UB law school. And it’s not just with these students, he notes. “When I visited her offices in New York, the upbeat, ‘can do,’ hard-working environment was obvious. She creates that environment by encouraging, guiding and complimenting. She expects effort, appreciates it and expresses her appreciation.”

Coffey agrees. “There’s a kind of spirit in the SBLI USA offices of real teamwork and commitment to each other. This kind of thing doesn’t happen by chance. The person at the top sets that kind of tone.”

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