

## LIGHTENING THE LOAD FOR OTHERS

By A. James Fuller & Michael G. Cartwright



A

# *Patricia Poehler '77*

The senior vice president for Marketing directs business for Farm Bureau Insurance from the comfortable confines of her office overlooking downtown Indianapolis. In many ways, Patricia Poehler epitomizes the corporate executive, as she exudes the confident professionalism and business acumen that one expects from someone in a high-level position. Her record stands on its own: she has achieved success. But, as the conversation continues, one might learn more about this business woman. Patty Poehler did not start out near the top of the corporate ladder. Instead, she worked hard and earned her way, climbing slowly through the ranks to the position she holds today. Furthermore, she is not the typical capitalist entrepreneur who cares only about the bottom line. Rather, she cares deeply for others and strives to help those around her. Truly, Patty Poehler exemplifies a life of service as well as business success.



B

Although Patty was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, her family moved to Indianapolis when she was one, and she has lived here ever since. Both of her parents worked—her mother as a cleaning lady—and Patty was the first person in her family to go to college. That experience as a first-generation college student makes her aware of both the excitement and the difficulties faced by individuals who are the first in their family to pursue an education beyond high school. She came to Indiana Central College in 1973 and began working on an associate degree in secretarial science. To help pay her way, she worked for Leo Miller in the business office. He and his wife, Alberta, soon convinced Patty that she should pursue a four-year degree in business education.

During her time as a student, she also worked for President Gene Sease and in the office of Ken Hottell. Her supervisors, professors, and fellow students made Patty feel at home on campus and she remembers the “family atmosphere” created by the friendly community and small classes.

On her graduation in 1977, Patty decided that she did not want to teach after all. Looking back now, she blames the educational program that did not put her in the classroom as a student teacher until she had already completed four years of study. Only then did she realize that she did not like teaching at the lower levels because of discipline problems. Unsure of what to do, Patty continued working in her current job, which she had started as a junior. Mrs. Miller had arranged for Patty to work for Farm Bureau Insurance as a co-op student, which worked something like a paid internship, although she earned no academic credit for it. She worked at night in word processing. Now, undecided about the future, she agreed to continue working at Farm Bureau for the summer, which would give her time to choose her course. She also began teaching a business communications course as an adjunct instructor at Indiana Central. She continued teaching in the evening division as an adjunct at the school for eighteen years.

At the end of the summer, Patty remained unsure about her future, so she stayed at Farm Bureau. What began as a cooperative education position became a career. She worked her way up through the company to reach her present position as senior vice president of Marketing, where she is responsible for supervising the work of about 1,000 staff members. Her career has been in the service areas of the company, including Human Resources, Training, and Building Services. Her current position, which she has held for the past eight years, is also service-oriented. Even in her professional work, then, Patty serves others, whether that service is to employees, agents, clients, or the company itself.

While climbing the corporate ladder, Patty also started a family. At age twenty-seven, she married her husband, John, a geologist, and they have two children. When her children reached college age, she began to think that it was time to give something back to the community. Patty wanted to live a “life of significance” and “contribute to

society.” She had always thought of service as something that came at a certain stage of life, when one had achieved success, raised a family, and had the time and resources to contribute. But she has come to realize that service can and should be a part of life no matter what one’s age. She remembers a quote from Christian writer Max Lucado, “Time will take your castles,” and thinks that it is important to serve whatever stage of life you might be in because you never know what the future may hold. If you don’t serve now, you might not be able to do so later.

Her own service centers on education and young people. At Farm Bureau, she started or helped with a number of programs that the company has for young people. Patty has been involved especially with three different programs. One of these is Excel, a creative scholarship program for high school students. The program calls for students to develop a topic in a creative way, be it in writing, art, music, or whatever medium they choose. The top three winners in six different categories are awarded scholarships. The state-wide program has grown to include more than 7,000 entries.

Another program is the Teenage Driver Safety and Education Program. This attempts to provide positive incentives for young drivers to practice safe driving techniques. Participants must be insured with Farm Bureau and are required to take a safety course and sign a contract. If they have a clean driving record after three years, the company awards them a \$1,000 savings bond. To date, they have given more than 10,000 of them. In addition to these two programs, Patty also works with the Indiana High School Athletic Association. Here, Farm Bureau sponsors championship sporting events and awards Mental Attitude scholarships of \$1,000 to athletes who practice good sportsmanship and demonstrate a positive character.



She also sees her job as a type of service. Her management style is one of “servant leadership,” and she tries “to serve the people of the company and, through them, the people of Indiana.” Her position requires a tremendous amount of service, but one area that she is especially proud of is her role as a mentor. Patty tries to mentor new employees in their jobs and, when necessary or possible, in their lives as well. One young woman who worked for Patty was caught in an abusive marriage. Patty worked hard to help her along the way as she tried to get out of the abusive situation.

Patty is proud of the fact that every secretary who has worked under her has moved on to serve as an executive secretary at a higher level. In addition to helping employees on the job, in their personal lives, and in their professional development, Patty has also helped many clients over the years. Farm Bureau prides itself in having a personal touch when helping people in a time of tragedy. “They aren’t just policy numbers,” Patty says, but “are part of a family.” The “clients as family model” fits well with the kind of environment Patty experienced in college, and she works hard to maintain the personalized touch that demonstrates a caring attitude and helps others.

Beyond her work at Farm Bureau, Patty also gives to young people privately, quietly donating money as anonymous gifts to help particular individuals in need. She serves on the boards of various charitable organizations, including the United Way and WFYI. She has also served as a member of the Board of Trustees for the University of Indianapolis. In addition to all of this work, she is working on a master’s degree in counseling and psychology, which she plans to use in some setting to help people after she retires from the business world.

Looking back, Patty realizes that, “I figured out what I wanted to do in life in my thirties.” At that time, she was working in Human Resources at Farm Bureau, and that helped her understand that she liked “working with people” and helping them. That Human Resources position was critical to her career path, because her various positions exposed her to different types of careers and situations, any one of which she might have pursued. But realizing what she was most passionate about—helping and working with people—made a huge difference. One thing she believes that we often “miss in education in general” is that schools focus too much on coursework and “don’t expose students to different positions and careers.” Thus, she tries to help young people by talking with them about such matters and encouraging them to explore different possibilities through things like internships.

Patty defines service in very personal terms, believing that it is something you do to “make the load of another person lighter.” This means working to change individual lives as well as efforts in broader arenas. She is excited to see so many young people focused on service and believes that individuals are motivated to serve by an “internal need to help other people.” Service is also something that is “nurtured by family, education, and church.” For her, Indiana Central filled a void for a first-generation college student, and she believes that her experience at the school “taught me life, family, and caring.” Although she was not aware of the school’s motto while she was a student, she does think that the college helped prepare her for service.

In retrospect, Patty Poehler is conscious of the fact that certain individuals at the University helped nurture her while she was a student and later an employee. The Millers had the greatest direct influence, but President Sease had an indirect effect, as he set an example for leadership and professionalism. Patty thinks that Indiana Central gave her “the opportunity to grow up” and provided a “safe environment in which to mature.” She arrived on campus as a shy girl, doing something that no one in her family had ever done. She left as a confident young woman prepared for what was then an undetermined future.

Today, she thinks that the University of Indianapolis can balance tradition and change. Patty believes that the school must change to meet new challenges, but that it is also possible to maintain that family atmosphere in which students are treated as individuals and faculty and staff offer personal attention and care. To keep the balance, the school has to stick to its core values, which include the personal attention, caring atmosphere, and small classes. The University must be intentional about all of this and remain a service provider if it hopes to allow more students to live out the motto “Education for Service.”

## INDEX OF PHOTOGRAPHS: IDENTIFICATIONS & PERMISSIONS

---

### *Patty Poehler '77*

- A (p. 78) Patty Poehler and her husband at their wedding. Photograph provided by Patty Poehler used with her permission.
- B (p. 79) Patty Poehler speaking at a Pacesetters Banquet. Personal photograph provided by Patty Poehler used with permission.
- C (p. 80) Patty Poehler making presentation to student winners as part of Project Excel. Personal photograph provided by Patty Poehler used with permission.