William Poe

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Interview

Trey Echols is the President of Highlands Associates, Inc., in Birmingham, AL. He has worked with them for 8 years. He worked for McColl Partners in Charlotte, NC, before it was sold to Deloitte. Prior to that, he was with Merrill Lynch. Trey is from Birmingham, AL, and attended Birmingham-Southern College.

**Why did you choose to do what you do and what draws you to your work?**

Strategic thinking. Trey said when he was calling on potential clients and trying to persuade them to move their accounts, he was also introducing them to a totally different concept. Having to figure out how to drive a value proposition home to a potential client always kept him on his toes. He said he remembers feeling energized by trying to solve a problem or by trying to do something a little different.

**How do you navigate competing work and other commitments, including health, family, etc.?**

Trey said he looks in the mirror often and says, “Have I taken on too much.” He thinks because of his desire to solve problems, he often finds himself attracted to a lot of different things. He said there is the lust for getting involved in things but then also the recognition that there's a limit. “It's very hard to tell yourself there's a limit and you have to find it,” he said. When you are over-committed and everything gets out of whack, he finds that he doesn’t pay attention to his health, he misses important details, and he doesn’t spend enough time with his family. Things get displaced and it takes a lot of intentionality. He said he does not always navigate it very well.

**Who in your life has served as a mentor or support?**

Hugh McColl, the former CEO and chairman of Bank of America. While Trey was working for McColl Partners in Charlotte, they sold to Deloitte. During this time he got to spend some time with Mr. McColl. McColl had a lot of great leadership axioms that he passed along. A lot of those have had an incredible influence on the way Trey thinks about things. One of the first things he told Trey was, “If you're going to be a leader you got to love people.”

**A time when you experienced a roadblock or a failure and how you navigated that experience?**

In the spring semester of his sophomore year, Trey was taking an economics class and found that midterm grades came back, he was failing the class. He said he had let his social life get the best of him. He thought he could sashay through that part of life and still succeed. He had done so poorly that the economics teacher told him he could go for broke on the finals. Trey decided that for 48 hours he was going to work really hard, and for 48 hours he didn’t leave the dorm. In doing this he realized that he was learning. He ended up doing well on the final and finishing the semester with a dignified C+ in the class. Almost failing this class was a low of low and a definite roadblock.

**What is one of your more major accomplishments?**

Jones Valley Teaching Farm. It is an organization that's been impactful to a lot of children. They raised $7 million during COVID and built a Center for Food education. To him, the personal accomplishment was getting involved and seeing how impactful the organization could be for the community.

**How have your life experiences shaped where you are today?**

He said one of the things that was most impactful to him was making the decision to move away from Birmingham. He lived in Atlanta, Chicago, and Charlotte. In moving away he feels he gained a broader perspective of the world. Now when he looks at a political issue or situation that might be bothersome, he first thinks, what are all the views around this, and how much information can I get before I get emotional about it? He tries to be well-informed and that’s helped him with his leadership style.

**What recommendations do you have for your younger self when you look back from where you are now?**

He would tell his younger self to get out of his comfort zone. Do something that scares you.

**How would you define or describe what it is to live a life of significance?**

T. Boone Pickens, who has passed away, was a successful entrepreneur in oil in Oklahoma. When Pickens was sick, he wrote a letter. In the letter, Pickens says that when you're in this world the impact you make on this world is equivalent to a bucket of water. You can shake your hand in the water and agitate it as much as possible but when you take your hand out of that water it goes back to calm. Trey thinks significance is a “you” question. Are you using your unique talents and perspective? Are you pushing yourself? At the end of the day, he really thinks it is an individual question.