

TRS Today “Meet Brian Guthrie” Transcript

Rhonda Price: Hello and welcome to TRS Today, a communications initiative of the Teacher Retirement System of Texas. I’m your host, Rhonda Price, and our guest today is Brian Guthrie, former Deputy Director and now Executive Director of TRS. And, congratulations Brian on that.

Brian Guthrie: Thank you Rhonda.

Rhonda Price: So Brian, you are the ninth person to serve as Executive Director since TRS began way back in 1937. So we thought we’d use this opportunity to help people get to know you a little bit better.

Brian Guthrie: Okay.

Rhonda Price: So we’ve got some questions for you.

Brian Guthrie: Alright.

Rhonda Price: Are you ready?

Brian Guthrie: I hope so.

Rhonda Price: Could you give our viewers a little bit of background about you; where you grew up, your family, and your fondest childhood memories?

Brian Guthrie: Absolutely. I guess the first thing I need to do is apologize, I’m not a native Texan, but I have lived here for the past twenty years and intend to live here for the rest of my life. My kids are native Texans of course, but I actually grew up in a little town called Chesapeake City, Maryland. Chesapeake City is the only town in Maryland that does not have a traffic light. And to the best of my knowledge at least the last time I was there five years ago it didn’t have a traffic light then either. So it’s a very small town. I grew up in modest surroundings, a little farm community, I enjoyed playing baseball as a child and have fond memories playing catch with my grandfather in the back yard, and it’s a love of the sport that I’ve carried on to my own kids. And while I was in high school I was fortunate enough to have my baseball coach was also my history professor and that was a great connection because not only did I love baseball but I also loved history in high school. He turned me onto math and to some other subjects and I was fortunately successful at those and I was able to get a scholarship to go to a little school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania called Franklin and Marshall College and that’s where I did my undergraduate work.

Rhonda Price: What did you major in?

Brian Guthrie: I was a double major in economics and history, again continuing that love of history from growing up. I completed both degrees in four years, and I graduated in the top one percent of my class.

Rhonda Price: Wow. So what brought you to Texas?

Brian Guthrie: Well, after graduating, or in my senior year of college, I was looking at graduate programs. At that point in my studies I had determined that I was very interested in public affairs, maybe thought about going into international diplomacy or something like that. So I looked at public policy schools around the country, I looked at some programs on the east coast. I also spread out and looked at programs in Kentucky and in Texas and in other places all around the country. The LBJ School of Public Affairs here in Austin offered me a scholarship which was a wonderful opportunity, but what really clinched it for me was that I also was able to get a job here in Austin working as a hall director on campus. And so with the promise of a job, not to mention a scholarship, it was too good to pass up and so I packed up my car and drove down to Austin.

Rhonda Price: So what type of jobs did you first hold and how did they prepare you for your new role here at TRS?

Brian Guthrie: Well, obviously my first jobs as a teenager were what many of us had, working at a Dairy Cream and serving soft serve ice cream and the such, but once I got into college I started focusing on tutoring and also being a hall director, a resident advisor, which was managing a hall with other students. Once I got out of the graduate school though, I was fortunate enough to get a job at the Legislative Budget Board which is an agency here in Texas and in Austin that prepares the state budget for the house and the senate here in downtown, and worked for them for several years. Through the course of my budget work with them I was noticed by then Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock who asked me to join his staff as a budget advisor and also as an advisor on health and human service issues, and it was at that point in my career where when I started on his staff I noticed that he didn't have anybody tracking pension issues for him and so I offered to do that, and it was I thought a nice marriage of not only my background in economics and math but also an important part of the state budget that was really being overlooked. And so I had an opportunity to carve out that niche and work with ERS and TRS in that capacity through Lieutenant Governor Bullock and then Lieutenant Governor Perry who was his successor in that position. And then when then Lieutenant Governor Perry became Governor in 2000, I joined his staff, again as a budget advisor and then eventually as an assistant director of his budget planning and policy shop, and from there joined TRS three years ago.

Rhonda Price: And since you've been here at TRS, what have been your overall impressions of the agency?

Brian Guthrie: One of the things that struck me about TRS when I first started was the amazing community of people that we have. It is a wonderful environment in which to work, to meet people of similar interest, to really feel like you're part of a family; you're part of something special. And I don't say that lightly, I've worked around state government and bureaucracies enough to know that there are a lot of agencies in Texas, a lot of agencies around the country in public service that don't have that same type of feel. And I can honestly say that TRS is something completely different. It really is a family community of people who are working together to try to give our members the best possible service.

Rhonda Price: I definitely have to agree with you on that, I've felt the same way being here at TRS. So, what do you see as the major short term and long term challenges facing TRS, and what guiding principles will you use as you lead our agency forward?

Brian Guthrie: Well, we do have some challenges. I'm fortunate to be following a very capable and a very passionate Executive Director in Ronnie Jung, who did wonderful things for this agency and under his stewardship really guided the agency through some difficult times. So he's leaving me with an organization that is in a very healthy and very positive position to move forward. That being said, we do have some budget concerns in the long term with some of our programs, particularly TRS Care. The long term cost of healthcare in this country and in our programs is an overriding concern and something that we are going to have to address sooner rather than later. So we're going to be paying very close attention to that. I also feel that as the incoming Executive Director I have an obligation to make sure that this agency is well positioned for the future, and so one of the things that I've been working on as Deputy Director and will continue to do so as Executive Director is to modernize our systems, to make sure that we're ready for the twenty-first century from a technology and an infrastructure perspective. But in addition to that, we really need to take into account that our membership is also changing and the expectations of our membership is changing. You know, we have retirees that sort of are grouped by generational characteristics and we have an incoming generation of retirees that are more technologically savvy, they have different expectations of what it means to be a good customer service agency. That doesn't necessarily mean being able to send materials in the mail or being able to call somebody on the phone, it means being able to access things on a website, it means being able to do things online, it means being able to do things at three in the morning if that's when you really want to conduct your business. And those are the types of individuals that we are going to have more and more of in our system moving forward and so I want to make sure that we're well positioned to not only meet the needs of our current retirees, but also the next generation.

Rhonda Price: And you mentioned members really having a good sense of the types of customer service they might want, members and retirees.

Brian Guthrie: Absolutely.

Rhonda Price: So if people have suggestions on how we can improve our services what should they do?

Brian Guthrie: I am fundamentally committed to being as transparent of a director and of running as transparent of an agency as possible. And to me transparency means sharing ideas, sharing information, having a discussion about what's working, what's not working, as changes are made getting feedback about what's good or what's perhaps bad about those changes and how they can be improved. And I'm committed to continuing that ongoing dialogue. One of the things that I've really enjoyed doing in my three years here is going out into the community and meeting with members. We have had a variety of opportunities through our report card tours, or by going to conventions of retirement association meetings around the state. And getting to meet our members on that one on one fashion has been very valuable for me and I think also has been valuable for them because I will spend time before and after a meeting, meeting them, asking questions, getting their feedback and that has really caught on and I

think that now what I notice when I go out to these events is that people are not as shy perhaps about coming and approaching me and just bending my ear a bit about what is on their mind. And I always will find time to listen to their concerns and if I can't answer their question then make sure that I can direct them to somebody in my agency who can, and just to be as approachable as possible.

Rhonda Price: Okay. Well Brian, we're coming to the end of our interview, but we really can't let you go without learning a little bit more about your family and some interesting hobbies that I've heard about.

Brian Guthrie: Well I do have some interesting hobbies. I am blessed to have a wonderful family. I met my wife Melissa here in Austin. She was also attending graduate school at LBJ and we met and married and we've been married for seventeen years now. We have three beautiful children. My son is nine and I have two girls, twin girls, who will turn five in just a couple of weeks. So we have our hands full at home but we love them to death and they keep us busy and they keep me grounded. I think it's important for anybody to always strike a balance between work and life and sometimes I feel like I'm a little out of balance one way or the other but at least I have both to keep my attention and keep me focused on what's really important in life. I am a baseball coach in my spare time for both my son and my girls and I really do enjoy that. But perhaps what most people don't realize about me is that I do like to attend renaissance festivals. I actually am not shy about dressing in costume and so the next time that some of you are perhaps out in Plantersville and you see somebody walking around in a kilt, it might be me.

Rhonda Price: Goodness. But what about at a board meeting?

Brian Guthrie: I have had one specific request from a board member to never wear a kilt in a board meeting after they saw a picture of me attending a renaissance festival.

Rhonda Price: Okay, so that's definitely decided.

Brian Guthrie: We don't need to worry about that.

Rhonda Price: Okay. Thanks Brian, and again congratulations.

Brian Guthrie: Thank you.

Rhonda Price: That's our time for now. We thank you very much for joining us and we hope you'll tune in for the next edition of TRS Today.