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CNN anchor speaks at OU about finding success

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

Soledad O'Brien took an entry-level job at TV station WBZ in Boston, an NBC affiliate, in 1989. But she wasn't reporting or writing news scripts – her main behind-the-scenes responsibility was to pull staples from the office bulletin board.

Today, O'Brien co-anchors "**American Morning**," CNN's flagship morning program. Her high-profile position follows an 11-year stint with NBC. During that time, she reported for the network's "Today Show," covering notable events such as the Columbine school shooting, the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster, the September 11 terrorist attacks, and others. She also anchored weekend editions of "NBC Nightly News" and co-anchored NBC's weekend coverage of the war in Iraq on the network's "Weekend Today" show.

In her lecture, "The Road to Success," hosted by Oakland University's Student Life Lecture Board on Nov. 20, O'Brien credited her meteoric rise to hard work, the support of her family and on-the-job mentors.

"When I entered this business, my idea of personal success was different from what it is today," said O'Brien before an audience of several hundred in the Oakland Center Banquet Room. "There was a time when I thought being an anchor would be my dream come true. But there's also more to life. My mornings begin at 3:30 a.m., but I can still pick up my daughters from pre-school and spend time with my family. I even threw a birthday party for my daughter and 20 3-year-olds last week. I try to be grateful every day because I also love what I do – my job gives me a window into other peoples' lives."

O'Brien spoke about her failures as much as her successes. One humorous incident occurred when she was a struggling new reporter at station KRON in San Francisco. O'Brien was sent to cover a sports story on the San Francisco Giants and gave a live report from a sports bar. What she failed to recognize until the camera lights came on were the number of drunken fans around her. She froze, the fans became rowdy, and the station quickly cut away to a taped segment.

"It's important that your bosses give you the opportunity to succeed, and these experiences are just as important as (learning from your failures)," O'Brien said. "I didn't get better right away and struggled to master live shots, but after three or five tries I finally got it right and was ready to go. I spent hours practicing in front of mirrors and listening to my tapes. My success came with hard work."

In addition to honing her on-air skills, O'Brien also sought the help of others who became mentors. She also spoke of being honored to be a mentor for other young reporters, particularly women and minorities.

"Mentors provide a ton of advice and will give critical feedback," O'Brien said. "It's really important that all of us take on younger people and show them the way. It was hard for me to find a mentor at KRON, because I was the first reporter hired after a bitter strike. But I kept up my relationship with NBC and when I was ready to move back to the network they were happy to have me. I thank the people at KRON for indirectly showing me I had to move on to move up."

O'Brien also spoke of David Bloom, her NBC co-anchor and mentor who died unexpectedly last spring while on assignment in Iraq covering the war. She became emotional when discussing their close working relationship, and how his death contributed to her leaving the network.

"It's also important to have peer mentors – people at your own level," O'Brien said. "I looked to David as a role model in many ways. He worked very hard for everything he achieved. When he died, the show ("Weekend Today") ceased to be a team. The bottom fell out emotionally and definitely played a part in my departure. The lesson is that life is short and if you have a dream, go out and accomplish it."

With a demanding, sometimes stressful job, a husband, and two daughters ages 3 and 19 months, time management also became an issue for O'Brien.

"Success on the job is not the be-all, end-all of life," O'Brien said. "I think there's a new focus today on having a whole, fulfilled life. This is part of a character issue – being who you want to be. And to me, character is critically important. My priorities are my husband first, then my kids, then my job. I think people are becoming very wary of workaholism. Perhaps our generation's

legacy can be finding an answer to this dilemma.”

O'Brien also said her parents' experiences with racism helped her to set personal priorities.

“My mother is from Cuba and my father is Irish and from Australia,” O'Brien said. “It was difficult for them to become married in the early 1950s because it was a mixed marriage. It was even hard for them to eat together at restaurants.

“The racism they experienced taught me how to manage my life and provided direction. I don't want to spend my time fighting battles – sometimes maneuvering around them is the best option rather than take away from what's important. Sometimes you have to let things go and stop trying to control them. You have to just trust what's inside you and move forward and let things be as they will be.”

O'Brien left the audience with final thoughts on the makeup of a successful person.

“Survivors are flexible, have a 'can-do' attitude, a sense of humor, and are people who rescue themselves,” O'Brien said. “They also have a wonderful attitude for life. You have to run your life and strive for success. Don't internalize negative feedback. If every person has a vote in your success, you won't get very far. Your career success is up to you.”

Junior communications major Claire Rymill took note of O'Brien's talk about balancing your work and personal life.

“I try to learn to manage my time between school and work,” said Rymill, who has a part-time job at Home Depot. “You have to take the time to decide what's most important for you. As a communications major, I also thought it was really great to hear her speak in person. I was really excited that she came to OU.”

The Student Life Lecture Board (SLLB) is responsible for bringing major speakers to lecture at Oakland University. The board is comprised of OU students, faculty and staff. In the past, SLLB has sponsored lectures by President Jimmy Carter, Montel Williams, Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou, Mitch Albom, Alex Haley, Dennis Archer, Jennifer Granholm, Ernie Harwell and many others.

The next scheduled SLLB speaker is Sister Souljah, who will lecture Jan. 19 at noon in Meadow Brook Theater. If you would like to comment on any SLLB program or suggest a speaker, contact the SLLB through the **Center for Student Activities**, 49 Oakland Center, or call them at (248) 370-2400.

SUMMARY

In her lecture, “The Road to Success,” hosted by Oakland University's Student Life Lecture Board on Nov. 20, CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien credited her success to hard work, the support of her family and on-the-job mentors. O'Brien currently co-anchors “American Morning,” CNN's flagship morning program. Her high-profile position follows an 11-year stint with NBC. During her lecture, O'Brien spoke about her failures as much as her successes.

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