

POTUSM

A Mock Interview with USM President Martha Saunders

By

USMNEWS.net Columnist Hal Greene

I recently sat down for a **mock interview** with embattled USM president Martha Saunders. Before our interview began, she guided me on a brief tour of the presidential suite in the AKL Administration Building. During that time, I noticed (i.e., overheard) that a number of USM staffers referred to her in their conversations with one another using the curious title of "POTUSM." We eventually took our places in her office, and the conversation began:

HG: President Saunders, your office is beautiful. There are some amazing fixtures and accessories here.

MS: There really are, and it's wonderful to spend part of my day working in here. I also spend some of my work day in the president's suite over in the stadium. It's beautiful over there too.

HG: Great. I noticed that list of current USM faculty over on your desk. Are those awards nominees, or something?

MS: No. I hate that you caught a glimpse of that. It is a list of current faculty who we suspect may be either a danger to their colleagues or their students, or perhaps even to themselves. The safety of people on this campus is a big concern. We have received complaints about them, and they were suspended from their teaching duties just this morning.

HG: Oh my. What did they say to you when you questioned them about their situations?

MS: I haven't questioned them. I spent all last week dealing with the administrative suspensions of the provost, chief information officer, and director of procurement and contract services over the mistakes that were made in the Samsung deal. Tomorrow we are taking the plane to Houston for the Conference USA championship game. There is too little time to do everything.

HG: You mean you haven't given them a chance to tell their side of the story? No "due process"?

MS: Sometimes you have to take action, especially in a post-Tech world. I have contacted a local psychiatrist to meet with each of them individually. I can get their side of the situation from the doctor. In the meantime, we now have a committee working on some policies for how to better handle dangerous faculty. We think what they come up with will be benchmarked by other institutions. I like the idea I've heard of putting all of the dangerous faculty on the coast, and having the rest of the faculty up here in Hattiesburg. There is even talk of opening up a USM branch on Cat Island, which would be even better for dangerous faculty. We'll have to wait and see. I'm sure they'll come up with something ripsniptious.

HG: Let's talk about what happened last week, which must have been a tumultuous one for you.

MS: You are so right. I was and still am so, so, so, very, so, very disappointed that some of my employees have gotten themselves in big trouble over those Samsung tablets.

HG: A lot people here at Southern Miss and elsewhere are finding it difficult to believe that a contract close to \$0.5 million was entered into without your approval, or even your knowledge, as you have indicated to the media. How do you explain that?

MS: Just like a lot of people around here, hundreds even, I only found out about the situation when I turned on that Galaxy Tab over there (Saunders pointed towards her desk) and pulled up usmnews.net. I was absolutely floored to later hear that [chief information officer] Homer [Coffman] had ordered *so many* of those devices from Samsung, and had even sent some to the IHL. I am still shaken by whole thing.

HG: So, you're pinning the whole thing on him – signing the contract without IHL approval, *and* sending a tablet to IHL Commissioner Hank Bounds?

MS: I sure am. I don't think I was even in town the day all of this actually happened. I was told by [USM vice president for administrative affairs] Russ [Willis] that Homer even wanted to use the USM plane to fly the tablet to the IHL office in Jackson. It turns out that I had the plane – Joe Bailey and I flew to Dallas to see a performance by a prominent USM alum. If we hadn't been there, Homer's situation might be even worse for him.

HG: You told the media that you knew *of* the Samsung program, just not its details. Are you standing by that?

MS: That's what I was told. Look, this is a great program, it's just that it wasn't handled properly. I know some faculty are upset because they don't think we know what we are doing over here. They need to know that, even though [former USM counsel] Lee [Gore] has retired, we have new counsel and the administration is covered by immunity. Nothing too detrimental will come of this. In the meantime, we are keeping tabs on which faculty are becoming too vocal in their criticism about this situation. That list over there (Saunders motioning towards her desk) will probably grow even longer. We simply have to feel safe over here [in the AKL Bldg] as we do our job of leading this university into its second century.

HG: There has been a lot of talk about “administrative bloat” . . .

MS: I'm *fur* it . . .

HG: Really? Many are saying that the institution is drowning in administrative growth and spending. How do you answer that?

MS: I don't. We are moving to RCM [responsibility-centered management], and part of that type of budgeting process calls for growth in those areas that are productive. I just won a silver hammer award, and a Scottie, two of the most prestigious honors in advertising and PR. As a result, more resources will flow into administration. You know, I think when we look back on this administration twenty years out from it, we'll all feel different about many things we are discussing as a campus community today, and over the past weeks and months. I'm really confident about that. I've been reading drafts of Bo Morgan's two-volume history of our administration, and he is providing just that type of reflection to our story. Yes, history will be much kinder to our administration than contemporary accounts by local media.

HG: For those who may not be familiar with Morgan, who is he?

MS: Bo is the university historian. He wrote a wonderful history of the institution that was prominently featured during our centennial celebration during 2010.

HG: While you seem comfortable with where the university is heading, many faculty see the institution as a rudderless ship without a real destination. What say you to that?

MS: I don't agree, of course. Look, I don't necessarily think it would be a bad idea to address that concern. Why not go outside of our tight little community bubble – out of the blue to, say, Pensacola, Florida – and find some fresh eyes . . . consultants . . . to come in, observe what's going on here, and provide a perspective that we can use as part of a new vision for the future. I could go for that. In fact, I think I will. And you know what? . . . When that occurs, and it will, the people who are fostering that undercurrent of doubt around the campus – doubt about the claim that we are the premiere research university of the Gulf south, and that we are headed to the top – will be just plain wrong. And . . . they will be out of excuses.

HG: Wow . . . What will this cost?

MS: As [USM athletics director] Richard [Giannini] said about us potentially costing Conference-USA \$20 million by losing to UAB, “we don't give a damn about the money.” Anyway, I can hire a consulting firm with savings from the reductions in my cabinet that I made back in 2007-08, my first year.

HG: What would you like people to know about you, the USM president?

MS: That I'm just a sweet southern girl who loves this school and who loves being its president. We are 10-2 and doing better than at any time since 1988. I can't think of a university with more rides to ride, nor of a president with a bigger heart for this place. Those who love USM should know that I would never do anything to hurt it.

HG: President Saunders, it has been a joy to talk to you. Before we conclude, I have been catching a glimpse of the screensaver on your computer, and I am itching to ask you to tell me what I'm seeing there.

MS: You know, that's a cute story. That photo was taken at a recent sorority party, and that is a group of Phi Mu sisters in costume. It's really adorable. By the way, you should come back this evening. We'll be lighting the USM Christmas tree. That's one of the two or three most important things I do every year. The town just loves it. If you miss it, I'll Tweet a photo. Merry Christmas!