TRACY LAQUEY PARKER IS SIMPLY...

COVER PHOTOS BY JACK PLUNKETT
INTERNET HALL OF FAMER TO AUSTIN INFLUENCER

By Bobby Hawthorne

Before my interview with Tracy LaQuey Parker, I threw together a list of possible opening questions, including:

1. Is that all you got?
   It would have been a sarcastic way of saying, “I read your resumé and am convinced you should be running Microsoft or NATO or a Mexican cartel.”

2. Have you ever failed at anything?
   It would have been a fawning way of saying, “I read your resumé and didn’t find much in the way of failure.”

3. You didn’t hack me before this interview, did you?
   It would have been a skittish way of saying, “I read your resumé and am certain you could obtain my Social Security and checking account numbers and late-night Internet viewing habits in five minutes using an Etch-a-Sketch and 40 feet of fishing line.”

So we met in the big conference room at the Howson Public Library, and Tracy came with questions too, mainly, “Why was I interviewing her when I could and should have been interviewing one of 50 or 60 of Tarrytown’s ‘amazing’ writers, musicians, influencers, geniuses, movie directors, former Longhorn football players, city and state officials, and run-of-the-mill unsung heroes and/or adorable scamps?”

She knows them all, and they all know her.

So I asked her to put together a list.

Well, here are a few reasons why we chose Tracy LaQuey Parker:

1. She already had a list. I had it an hour after the interview.
2. She’s in the Internet Hall of Fame. That alone should be enough.
3. She founded the UTeach Institute and served as its director for five years. When UT boasts, “What starts here changes the world,” they’re talking about the UTeach Institute. Look it up.
4. She knows Mike Judge of Beavis & Butthead and Idiocracy fame. Mike owns a house in the neighborhood, she tells me, and he comes around all the time. She and Mike are friends. Not best friends, but he answers her texts, so if I were to come to my senses and want to interview him instead, she’d see if she could set it up.

I have every reason in the world to believe she could because she also knows Al Gore.

... After some small talk, I got down to business: “Have you ever failed at anything?”

She laughed. “Do we have enough time to go through all the things I’ve failed at?” she asked, apparently forgetting that she’s a best-selling author who sits on the board of the Texas Tribune and a half-dozen or more other outfits.

Her first brush with failure came during her junior year at Boswell High School, northwest of Fort Worth, when she ran to be student council president her senior year. She worked hard and thought she had it locked up until a dark-horse candidate came out of nowhere to steal victory from her at the last second.

Remind you of anyone?

“Well, I know what Hillary Clinton feels like,” Tracy said, although the more apt comparison might be another Tracy — Tracy Flick, the insufferable suck-up overachiever played by Reese Witherspoon in Alexander Payne’s dark comedy, Election.

In the greater scheme of things, losing was more a disappointment than a failure, but Tracy said she had been used to succeeding, so she had to learn to deal with it either way because greater challenges lay ahead.

“Once I hit college and the ‘real world,’ I dealt with failure and rejection on a more regular basis, like most people,” she said. “I think most successful people have. They just know how to reframe the situation, learn from it and move on. It’s tempting to have a victim mentality, and I never want to have that. If I don’t like the outcome, I have the power to change things.”

In other words, it doesn’t matter that you fail. It only matters what you do next. She said she wishes she had learned that earlier.

Otherwise, she said she wouldn’t change much about her life.

“I like who I am. I like where I’m at. I like how I’ve become myself,” she said. “I’ve relaxed a little bit, and I don’t take myself as seriously.”

Keep in mind “as seriously” comes from someone who told me, perhaps jokingly but perhaps not, that if she had been elected student council president, her goal was to “change the world.”

... Either way, she has changed the world.

A former colleague at Cisco Systems, Inc., described Tracy as “a driving force,” whose contributions to the company’s education marketing development efforts were “priceless.”
“Brilliant, thorough, personable, technically astute, tenacious, detail-oriented, curious, funny,” another colleague added.

She’s keynoted conferences across the nation as well as in Spain, Japan and Australia. In November she was named a “World Changer” by the UT College of Natural Sciences. She serves, has served or will serve on boards of directors representing SafePlace, Knowbility, the Austin Museum of Art, the Austin Film Society, the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University and the Austin Adderley School of Performing Arts, among many others.

In her spare time, she appointed herself the Longhorn Marching Band’s unofficial videographer. Parents of band members can find seven or eight years of halftime performances on YouTube. Anyone can.

She’s also learning French. She said it might take her 300 years to be fluent, but she’s determined. Incidentally, she has a friend — a former Tarrytown resident — who has an apartment in Paris and would be a great person for me to interview.

“He’s amazing,” she said.

Tracy was born in Canada. Her father was a U.S. fighter jet pilot who later flew for American Airlines, and she grew up in the Chicago suburbs until seventh grade, when her dad announced, “It’s time to move back to Texas.”

“I was 13, and I thought, ‘What do you mean back?’” she said.

Her dad was born in Dalhart during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, but he still had family in the Metroplex, so they moved to Fort Worth.

After high school graduation, she applied to one university: UT-Austin.

She majored in computer science and survived its early Marine Corps/Parris Island culture. She also joined a sorority, but that was about it. She said she wishes she’d gotten more involved in leadership programs, but she came from a rural area, and it was the Eighties, before UT was as user-friendly as it is now, which reminded her: There’s a guy at UT who is doing the greatest things with first-generation students. I should do a story about him.

“He’s amazing,” she said.

Anyway, she graduated from UT and landed a well-paying job as a Unix systems engineer with a giant corporation in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

“That is what I was groomed for,” she said. “To get the job and stay there 34 years and get the watch and the pension. That’s what I learned growing up. But I hated the job. It was so hierarchical, so old school.”

Tracy is not old school. Though technically a Baby Boomer (born 1963), she’s more of a Gen Xer: independent, resourceful, self-sufficient, with general disdain for authority, especially micro-management.

One day she was chatting with a friend with whom she’d worked at the UT Computation Center, and he told her, “There’s this thing called the Internet, and since you left, we’ve gotten connected, and it’s so cool.”

And she thought, “Wow. That’s what I want to do.”

A year later she quit the high-paying job that she hated to return to UT and become an impoverished operating systems specialist, tasked with connecting K-12 public schools to the Internet as well as offering email and bulletin board bric-a-brac. The network was called the Texas Education Network, or TENET.

Not only did she design TENET’s all-text menu system, she served as its one-person help desk, which included traversing the state, speaking to teachers at in-service meetings, which can be every bit as gratifying as lecturing dogs.

“I was standing up there, teaching them how the Internet works, and they were talking and grading homework and whatever,” she said. “It was awful.”

A superintendent from somewhere wrote her a letter, apologizing for how badly the teachers behaved. She still has it.

Even while she was trying to explain the whole “the Internet is going to change the world” idea, she had no clear idea what TENET would do. Fortunately, Texas public education produced the same old answer: Help football.

Every other year, the University Interscholastic League reschedules schools into six conferences, four regions and 32 districts. Before TENET, superintendents and athletic directors would drive to Austin for a meeting where the new alignments were distributed by hand, often setting off stampedes for hotel pay phones. Coca-Cola is not as protective of its formula as the UIL is of this list, and Tracy helped take it from mimeograph to microchip.

Because she was the only person working TENET’s User Desk, she answered the same questions over and over and over, and that’s what prompted her to write The Internet Companion: A Beginner’s Guide to Global Networking.

“I remember thinking, ‘Someone needs to write a book about this because I keep saying the same thing over and over,’ and at that time, a friend who lived in Boston called me and said, ‘Someone needs to write a book.’ And I said, ‘Yeah. Someone needs to write a book.’ And she said, ‘Why don’t you write a book?’ And I said, ‘Because I’m not a...
writer,' and she said, ‘We’ll get you help.’"
So she wrote the book, and now she’s in the Internet Hall of Fame.
“I took a huge pay cut to return to UT,” she added. “I was young and stupid, but it was the smartest thing I ever did.”

Of course, no one achieves the level of success she did without running herself ragged, and she certainly did, so much so that she eventually ended up in the hospital with a panic attack she thought was going to kill her.
She knew something had to change. She rarely saw friends. She had no idea what was going on in Austin. She was involved in no local activities.
Then she met a woman named Paula Stout, who introduced her to Cathy Bonner, who encouraged her to apply for Leadership Texas, a statewide leadership program for women. From there, she met Dr. Mary Ann Rankin, who at the time was the Dean of UT’s College of Natural Sciences. She first invited Tracy to join their advisory council and then offered her a job to help launch the UTeach Institute program for STEM teacher preparation.
“So I took that leap from volunteer to employee, even though I had ZERO background in teacher preparation,” Tracy said. “I just hired all the brilliant people who did and supported them. We worked our tails off; this was a startup in every sense of the word, and we were incredibly successful.”
UTeach is now at over 45 universities nationally and is moving the needle in creating more highly qualified STEM teachers.
“After I left that position, I once again had no plan in place, but I decided what I really wanted to do was get involved as much as I could locally in Austin in areas that interested me,” she added. “I have always loved Austin and have always been impressed with the stem cell DNA that has allowed us to grow into the city we’ve become. I think anything that brings us together and gives us a purpose is a good thing.”
Many of the world’s problems would be solved if people spent more time improving their own neighborhoods, she said.

“Change really does happen locally,” she added. “We really can make a difference, starting in Tarrytown and other Austin neighborhoods. So I am a huge proponent of that and a huge admirer of people who give their time and energy towards those goals.”

She’s also working to maintain greater balance in her life, and it’s not been easy. It takes discipline to let go. She swears by her Apple Watch, which uses a series of illuminated concentric circles — sort of like laps around a track — to remind her to stand up, move around and exercise, to put herself first.
“There are days I have zero desire to exercise,” she said, “but I’m screwed now because I have to ask myself, ‘Is today the day you break your streak?’"

On the day this story was turned in, the streak was at 210 days.

One last thing: A couple of hours before our first interview, I emailed Tracy a list of questions I planned to ask. In jest, I tacked on, “Could you apply your knowledge and skills to fixing traffic on Exposition Blvd.?”

Big shock: She could!
“Build a subway system,” she said. “Everyone thinks I’m crazy when I say that, but it’s doable. Go downtown and look at all the holes they’re digging for parking garages. They’re like 10 stories down. If they can do that, they can build a subway system. It would be painful as all get-out, but it would be awesome.”
She also thinks we should consider zip lines.
“Imagine it,” she added. “You could zip right across Exposition.”
I bet she knows someone who’s working on this right now, someone living in Tarrytown, an unsung hero, and if I were to come to my senses and want to interview him or her, she’d help set it up.
Because she is amazing.