

Myra Frady: Building relationships at Oxford College

By Kimber Williams | Emory Report | July 5, 2013



Myra Frady, executive associate dean for resource planning and chief financial officer at Emory's Oxford campus. Emory Photo/Video.

Gazing upon Oxford College's quiet, green campus from her Seney Hall office, Myra Frady sees a landscape alive with change — much of it, shaped with the help of her guiding hand.

As executive associate dean for resource planning and chief financial officer at Emory's Oxford campus, Frady oversees a wide range of responsibilities, including finance and budgeting, informational technologies, auxiliary services, property acquisition and rental management, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the City of Oxford.

But one of her most visible roles involves resource planning — managing and maintaining the buildings and grounds here at the historic birthplace of Emory College. Today, about 900 students annually choose to begin their Emory education at the two-year residential campus — a unique option among American universities.

Balancing demands of limited space and modern technology against the responsibility of historic preservation is no small task, especially as Oxford College continues to grow. Over time, it has become Frady's passion.

Yet ask Frady about the most important thing that she's helped build here at Oxford and it boils down to one word: relationships.

Emory Report visited with her this summer about a recent spate of construction and change on the Oxford campus:

How did you find your way to Oxford College?

I've been at Oxford for 24 years — I actually came here to teach mathematics and computer science, and I continued to teach part-time until 2000. I would still be teaching, I think ... but I can't provide that really important time outside of class that students need and [that] we pride ourselves on at Oxford College. So I try to serve in other ways.

After teaching, I went into information technology at a time when computers were still fairly primitive (laughs) and started building that department. Then Dean Bill Murdy said, "I think the business office could use a little help." I came over to help with the basic accounting functions and student billings.

The next dean, Dana Greene, added the budgeting piece and some of the grounds and buildings responsibilities. Our current dean, Stephen Bowen, fleshed out my job description, formalized the buildings and grounds concept, and brought it into a very workable, functioning entity that gets lots of input and support from faculty and staff.

The scope of your work is quite varied. How did your academic background prepare you for that?

I grew up in East Tennessee, a very small town — Etowah, Tenn. — between Knoxville and Chattanooga. But I got my bachelor and masters degrees from Georgia State and have lived in and around Atlanta for 40 years.

At Georgia State I actually started out in information systems at the business school. They demanded that I take the same level of calculus that was required in arts and sciences, and I loved it! I marched over to the College of Arts and Sciences and said, "Sign me up..." But I did have a good year-and-a-half of business courses under my belt, so there's always been a blend of business and mathematics there.

This was not a time that math and computer science fields were flooded with women?

No, it wasn't. In fact, I remember one of my professors in college saying that women weren't capable of studying mathematics. You know, hearing those things challenged me, rather than made me angry. I said, "I can do this ..."

What is the challenge of building and restoration on the Oxford campus?

To me, being able to restore these buildings and have them function as state-of-the-art classrooms is, first, a personal joy and second, an IT nightmare (laughs). You have walls that are 1-foot thick, solid brick, and you have to find a way to establish infrastructure that will support the technology. It's not easy.

But I have wonderful working relationships with our project managers, Emory University Architect Jen Fabrick and the University's administrators. These are some very talented people. I really take advantage of their generosity and it works. University Technology Services has some great people who have had experience with doing this infrastructure work, too. Over time, I've been able to pick up on some of the tricks of the trade.

I think the more important question is what it means to our faculty and students to have spaces that inspire you, not only to do your best teaching, but also to do your best learning. To have an environment that can showcase those talents, with technologies that are seamless from classroom to classroom.

This has been a season of renovation at Oxford College. What are your success stories?

I think that Language Hall is a prime example: we just finished a \$3 million renovation and addition. It was so sensitively treated and researched. What you get is the opportunity to study the old photographs of these buildings, the old floor plans, then take them apart board by board and see what you find. We have a display case in Language Hall right now that has bottles and grade reports and all sorts of things that were found under the building.

At Williams Hall, we discovered a deferred maintenance problem — the trusses were sinking. This building has an indoor running track that is hanging from these trusses, which are massive. But they had to be raised very slowly

— some between 6 and 10 inches — pulled back up and secured. We've also been able to restore the slate roof. We're now in the process of replacing the mortar between the bricks, which after 100 years has deteriorated. And we're very close to completing a restoration of Seney Hall, one of our signature buildings on campus, which is very gratifying.

We've also closed the Quadrangle to vehicular traffic and completed bricking in the walkways, restoring them as rays that radiate outward, just as you'll find in the original college plan.

What satisfaction do you get from helping guide such visible works?

I am so fortunate to have had the opportunity. From a professional standpoint I so value the collaborations that have gone into these projects and the opportunity to work with some extraordinary people and bring this vision of Oxford to the forefront. Of course, I couldn't do any of it without the support of my amazing staff.

It's important remember why we do this. It's not about the buildings, it's not about the money, it's not about the bricks and mortar, it's about our students, our faculty, our staff. It's about the people here and what we're doing here — this extraordinary opportunity that our students have for a liberal arts intensive education in the first two years, complete with leadership opportunities.

That's the "why" — and I think that's the most important part of my story.

What are your interests outside the workplace?

I'm a digital photographer — I used to be a gallery artist in [nearby] Covington. I love a macro view, getting in close on something and blowing out the background to isolate and study elements of the whole. I want to take pictures of things that don't know I'm taking pictures and capture who and what they're doing and why they're doing it.

It always gets back to the "why" for me on many levels.