

Leap of Faith

By Shannon E. Brewer Rooney '03

Alumna and College Trustee Paula Dawning '71 made a midlife career change that allowed her the opportunity to give back.

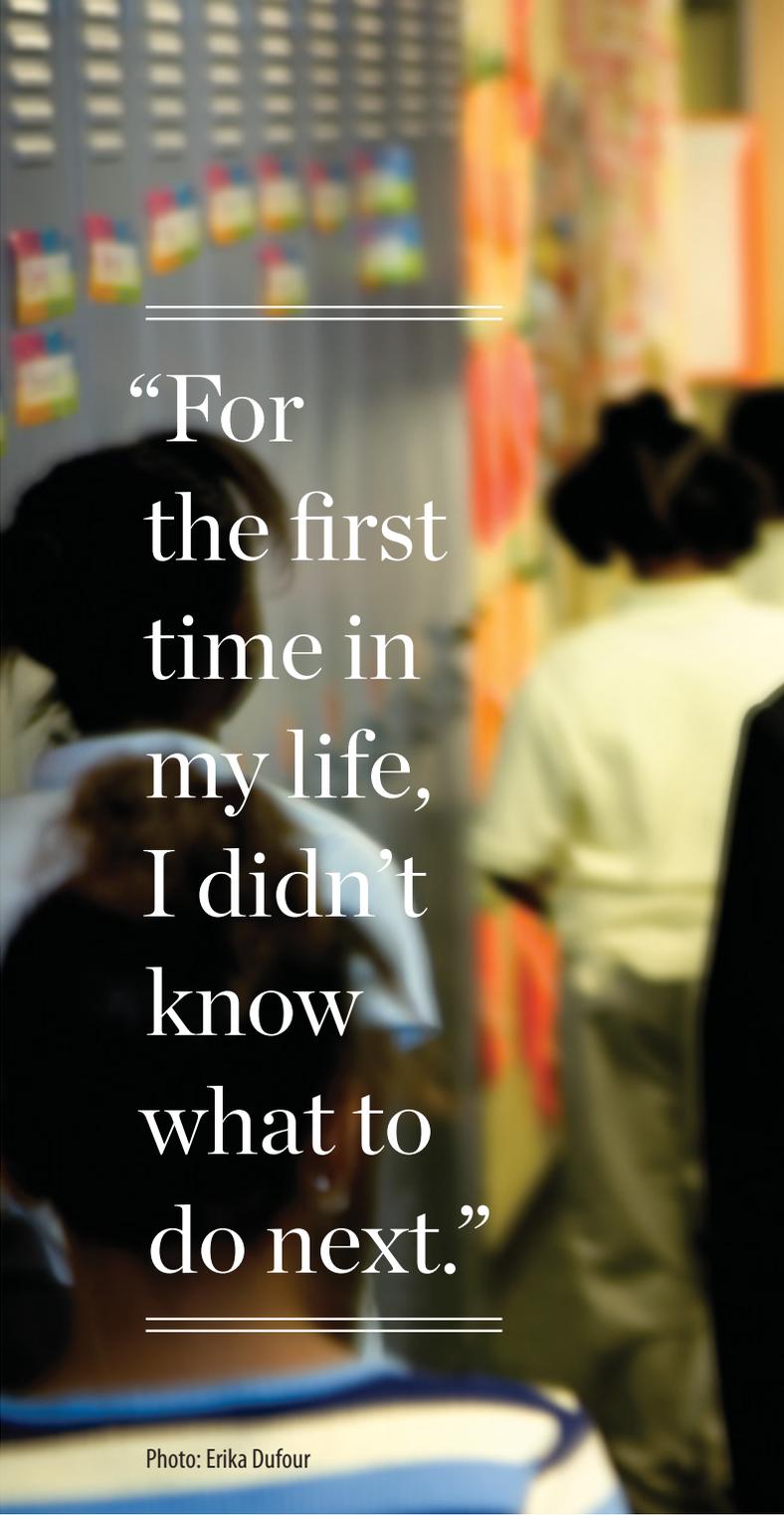
Sometimes it's a feeling we've only begun to acknowledge, or an "aha" moment, that inspires us to make major changes in our lives. And sometimes it's that nagging little voice inside of us that forms the foundation for our leaps of faith.

Paula Dawning '71 refers to that little voice, that calling, as her "Abraham moment." After 23 years in corporate leadership with communication giant AT&T, Dawning's spirit became restless. "You're done here," she heard God clearly saying. Feeling like Abraham moving his people out of his homeland with no clear destination, Dawning answered the call. She took advantage of an early retirement package from AT&T and posed one question in response to God's call, "I hear you, Lord. Where is it you want me?"

It was scary. "I'm a planner and for the first time in my life, I didn't know what to do next," says Dawning.

She knew only that she had led a blessed life so far. She had traveled the globe for AT&T, setting foot on almost every continent. She had received a good education and had met interesting people who taught her a lot about the world and about herself. She wanted to use her gifts to make the world a better place.

In retiring early, Dawning had taken a big leap and, thankfully, the soft landing appeared—in the form of an email from a good friend. This friend put her in touch with the Eli Broad Foundation, a philanthropic organization in Los Angeles that funds programs and policies to benefit students in public schools. They also educate non-career superintendents. She read about their mission and her interest was piqued. Dawning called the program director who happened to answer his own phone. He encouraged Dawning to apply.



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Photo: Erika Dufour

When asked why she gravitated toward education, rather than, say, feeding the hungry or disaster relief, Dawning points to two things. First, she has always loved children and most of her volunteer activities involved working with children and at schools. Second, she is the fifth of thirteen children and her family experience provided her with an understanding of children's needs, educational and otherwise.

In 2002, Dawning graduated with the inaugural class of superintendents from the Broad Foundation. Concurrent with completing the program she took on an interview for superin-



tendent of the Benton Harbor Areas Schools district in Benton Harbor, Michigan. “It was supposed to be a practice interview,” she says, emphasis on *practice*. She seized the opportunity, which turned out to be the gateway to her new career. She was hired.

For the next five years Dawning worked to improve Benton Harbor schools. She applied her executive and organizational skills to her task, overseeing twelve financially struggling schools with 4,700 students. One of her proudest achievements was working with staff to raise the reading proficiency—and she did, from 38 percent to 78 percent.

Her passion for the work never waned. “How could I look at those children, at those hopeful faces, and not do my very best work for them every day?” she says.

The job was demanding but rewarding. Eventually Dawning retired for health reasons. She left feeling that as superintendent of Benton Harbor schools, she had done the most important work of her life. Her big career change was a decision she will never regret. “I’ve always felt that God has ordered my steps. My only job was to listen and obey.” c