

PROFILE

KIM, MONICA AND LISA MIRTH:

A Family Tree Planted in Education: Three Sisters are All Business School Graduates

By Aaron Ragan-Fore

As the Mirth sisters sit down for their weekly lunch together, it's easy to see that they possess the easy-going communication shorthand that so often accompanies the shared history of a sibling relationship. Seemingly neutral names or phrases dropped into the conversation elicit knowing nods, eye rolls, or even peals of laughter.

Today the topic of conversation is the UW Business School. It's no surprise that each of the three young women has something to say on that particular subject, because each is an alumna.

Commitment to education is a guiding principle of the Mirth family, a trait the sisters can trace to the influence of their parents. Stanford and Quy Mirth instilled a love of learning in their daughters. Eldest daughter Kim Mirth Woods (BA 1995) recalls how her father would invite neighbors over to witness how quickly his little girls could read, and that their mother would take the girls to the library on weekend mornings for hours of reading.

Monica Mirth (BA 1999) remembers that her parents asked her to "play school" with her younger sister Lisa (BA 2001) so often that she started asking her teachers for extra copies of assignments that she could bring home.

"Our father is a proud man, and I think that really pushed us to go further," explains Kim. "Some students in my classes were given money by their parents for earning good grades. We were never given money. Our incentive was the look on our father's face when we brought home our report cards."

It's a good thing the girls were close, because their family lifestyle made friendships with other children difficult. Stanford Mirth is a retired Army drill sergeant, and moved his family frequently as he was reassigned around the world. "We were the only constant in each others' lives," explains Kim. "A lot of people can point to a best friend they have had since third grade. We don't have that because we were moving every three years. We were each others' best friends."

Soon after their father's final relocation to Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, Kim decided to pursue a degree at the University of Washington. She enrolled in the Business School as a human resource management/organizational behavior major. She graduated in 1995, marking the first time a member of the Mirth family completed college. Kim now works in the talent-sourcing department at Amazon.com.

By the time Kim's younger sisters were ready for college, it seemed only natural that Monica and Lisa would stay close to each other and to Kim, so each enrolled at the UW. Monica double-majored in accounting and information systems, and graduated in 1999. Now she has a job with the internal audit unit at Starbucks corporate headquarters.

Monica enjoyed two overlapping years of college with her younger sister Lisa, an accounting major who graduated in 2001 and is now working in user support at Microsoft.

Lisa remembers that when she started taking business courses as a sopho-

more, greetings from her professors on the first day of class often consisted of a good-natured exclamation such as, "Oh, another Mirth sister! You guys just keep on coming!"

That reception was no surprise, as Lisa was by then accustomed to following in her family's footsteps. "By the time I was in high school, I was already thinking of us as a UW family," she explains. Even though it meant trailing behind two older siblings, Lisa had no reservations about choosing the UW Business School. "When I think of career and success, I think that the Business School is just the perfect picture for me," she explains.

With an African-American father and a Vietnamese-American mother, the Mirth sisters often weren't quite sure where they fit in. Frequently, each of the girls was the only African-American student in her classes. "You have to look beyond color," says Kim. "Our parents instilled in us that we were simply smart young women. We went to school with the mindset that we belonged on the honor role as much as anyone else."

Lunch is finished now, and plates are pushed aside as the Mirth sisters begin recounting stories of the University District apartment they shared off and on over a decade, and of Monica and Lisa's rather comedic college dance recital. All three clearly relished their time living and studying together and are visibly amused at the memories they share. "We just like to laugh at each other," remarks Monica.



THE MIRTH SISTERS: (from left to right) LISA, KIM AND MONICA.

But sharing an educational experience had some uses beyond humor. “There were certain contacts that Kim recommended,” Monica mentions. “She suggested specific counselors and professors, and recommended which quarters I should take particular classes. Then when Lisa arrived at the UW, I began passing that information on to her as well.”

“It was really nice to have a sister in school at the same time,” adds Lisa. “Monica still had her notes, and the material was fresh in her mind. A sister can tell you her honest advice, including the things an academic advisor can’t say.”

Along with sisterly guidance, Lisa also credits her Business School education for her success at Microsoft. “The Business School teaches students how to work in teams, like you would in corporate America, and how to operate as a group,” she says. “I had a lot of leadership opportunities in organizations like the Association for Black Business Students, and the Beta Alpha Psi business fraternity.”

“Networking through my activities with the Business and Economic Development Program helped me a lot,” Monica says. “I gained business sense, and learned how to interact in a business environment.”

Kim sums up her thoughts succinctly. “Overall, I think the biggest thing my college years taught me is discipline.”

The Mirths have a bit of advice for siblings attending the same university. “I had to pave the path,” says Kim. “I had all the hits and bruises and bumps. So I would say to younger siblings, don’t re-create the wheel. Just follow your sister and learn from her mistakes.”

“And if you’re a younger sibling, don’t feel like you have to follow your older siblings’ steps exactly,” counters Lisa. “Walk in the path that they’ve paved, but try to find out what works best for you.”

Forging her own path altogether is the youngest Mirth daughter, Crystal, who is beginning her freshman year this quarter at UW’s Tacoma campus, with a plan to major in communications. Crystal’s three sisters have not so subtly hinted that perhaps she shouldn’t break up their “matching set” of UW business degrees.

“But of course we wanted to leave that decision to her,” adds Lisa. “We encourage her to do what she enjoys.”

Anything less would violate the commitment to personalized education that has become a Mirth family hallmark.

Kim, Monica, and Lisa have enjoyed chatting for an hour, but it’s already past 1:30, time for each of the Mirth women to return to her own office. Further shared memories and stories of their college years will have to wait.

At least until next week’s lunch.