Business Expert Rocks Her Passions

By Karla Jackson, ’88 & MSM ’13, and Penny Carnathan, ’82

W hen business consultant Eileen Rodriguez went on vacation to
Iceland, land of "gorgeous volcanoes," she traveled with members of USF’s Geology
Alumni Society. She couldn’t have chosen better companions.

Non-rockhounds might have been tugging at
her sleeve to steer her into shops, she says. These
folks, like her, preferred to be outdoors soaking
up the topography. Plus, she got to learn from
gologists still working in the field.

"They can tell you the whole
story; they can tell you how those
rocks came to be," she says.

The regional director of USF’s
Small Business Development Center
(SBDC), part of the Muma College
of Business, Rodriguez is also a
licensed professional geologist. She
switched career tracks 18 years
ago, becoming a full-time business
mentor the same year she co-
ounded the Geology Alumni
Society, ("We call it GAS, which is
awful, I know"), one of the USF
Alumni Association’s most active
groups.

Members support future geologists in
countless ways, including two endowments and
a scholarship fund. "Rock Breaker" get-togethers
at the beginning of each semester for students,
faculty and alumni; and community education
projects such as GeoPark, a rock zoo on USF’s
Tampa campus.

"The alumni enrich our programs in a lot of
different ways and Eileen has been instrumental
in that," says geology Professor Len Vacher, the
impetus behind the society’s creation in 1997.
"She brings those business skills and perspectives,
which most of us [scientists] just don’t have. She
gets things done."

Rodriguez manages the society’s finances,
coordinates banquets and creates educational and
networking opportunities for students, including
teaching a fall master’s level course on vital
business-world skills for geologists.

"The Geology Department at USF
has been a big part of my life," she
says. "I moved to Florida because of it,
met my husband through it, made a
ton of great friends. How could I not
want to give back?"

And she gets a lot in return, she
says, including the chance to share
mind-blowing experiences, like gaping
at Iceland’s spectacular columnar
basalt formations – stone columns
created by lava – with equally
awestruck friends.

More important, she knows that
by contributing to students’ success,
she’s helping society at large: "Everything geolo-
gists do is for the good of the public. We safeguard
the environment."

Rodriguez came to USF for grad school, earning
her master’s in geology in 1987.

"My first semester here, I met my husband. He
was also in the grad program," she says. Today,
Steve Camp, ’82, is a professional geologist for the
Southwest Florida Water Management District and
From left, Eileen Rodriguez shares a dream geology vacation in Iceland with her husband, Steve Camp, ’82, Lynn Maybury, ’83, Jon Hull, ’97, and Cathy Reas, ’89. The five Geology Alumni Society members were taking in the columnar basalt formations (behind them) at the Hjalparfoss waterfalls in 2004.
Rodriguez, center, meets with SBDC associate directors Bill McKown, left, and Yanina Rosario. Rodriguez, a licensed professional geologist, changed career tracks 18 years ago, but remains an active member of the Geology Alumni Society.

a member of GAS; the couple are Life Members of the USF Alumni Association.

For several years, Rodriguez worked in hydrogeology, specializing in solving problems created by leaky underground fuel tanks. She launched her own company; she got to know the SBDC, which provides low-cost training, free consulting, and business research for its clients. She took its managing and marketing classes, and its experts guided her through making Rodriguez Environmental Inc. eligible for government contracts.

Along the way, she discovered a passion for business; she earned her MBA at USF in 2002.

“She came back to us looking like a businesswoman!” Vacher says.

And she rocked that role. A longtime member of the Hispanic Professional Women’s Association, Rodriguez worked to increase the number of SBDC bilingual consultants to meet growing demand. That effort, in part, led to her winning the USF Society of Latinos Staff Award in 2012.

A nice surprise, she says, but she’s more proud of helping businesses of all types launch, thrive and create jobs. At last count, in 2013 the SBDC helped create 685 new companies statewide and generate $2.2 billion in sales for the 10-county Tampa Bay region.

She brings that real-world know-how to geology students, too, says Vacher.

Each fall she teaches Introduction to Professional Geology, part of a master’s level course that combines science training and workplace skills. More than a dozen geology alumni help out, serving as guest lecturers and professional mentors for students.

“It was one of the best classes I’ve ever taken,” says 26-year-old Joel Raven, who enrolled last fall. “They really know their stuff, and you know what they’re telling you is going to help you a lot.”

At the time, Raven was a newcomer to USF and in the midst of a discouraging job search. Through the class, he quickly found helpful new friends: the alumni.

“They were forwarding me job opportunities and encouraging me. I was just a new guy and I felt like I had a whole team of people helping me,” he says.

By the end of the semester, he had a job with his mentor, society vice chair Matt Wissler, MS ’03 of Geosyntec Consultants.

Stories like that make Rodriguez realize how far the tight-knit group has come.

“When we started, it was just a great way to get together, drink some beer, have a good time,” she says.

“It morphed over the years. It’s amazing the amount of things we do.”

Geology Alumni by the Numbers

1,213 Geology Alumni*

118 Alumni Association Members*

27 Life Members*

1 Rock Sanctuary GeoPark

2 Endowments and 1 Scholarship Fund

Dr. Richard A. Davis Jr. Endowed Fellowships
Sam B. Upland Field School Scholarship Fund
GAS Field School Endowment

5 Established, Recurring Events

Fundraiser banquets
Geology Expos
Rock Breaker socials
Professional Science Masters Symposiums
Resume workshops

*As of Jan. 12, 2015

Find the chapter or society that’s right for you at www.usfalumni.org/groups.