

Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

---

Redbird Buzz

Alumni Engagement

---

4-11-2023

## Redbird Buzz Episode 21: George Pruitt, April 11, 2023

Rachel Kobus Interviewer

*Illinois State University*, rkobus@IllinoisState.edu

George Pruitt Interviewee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/redbirdbuzz>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kobus, Rachel Interviewer and Pruitt, George Interviewee, "Redbird Buzz Episode 21: George Pruitt, April 11, 2023" (2023). *Redbird Buzz*. 27.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/redbirdbuzz/27>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Engagement at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Redbird Buzz by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact [ISUREd@ilstu.edu](mailto:ISUREd@ilstu.edu).

# Redbird Buzz

## Episode 21: George Pruitt

---

*April 11, 2023*

**Rachel Kobus** 00:10

Welcome to Redbird Buzz, I'm Rachel Kobus from Alumni Engagement. Today's guest Dr. George Pruitt received a bachelor's in biological sciences in 1968, a master's in counseling education in 1970, and was named an honorary degree recipient in 1994, all at Illinois State University. He is one of the longest-serving public university presidents in the nation with 35 years at Thomas Edison University, where he is now a board distinguished fellow. He is active in the formation of educational policy nationally and within the state of New Jersey, and has consulted widely in business and government. He has served in an advisory capacity to five Secretaries of Education under three Presidents of both parties. He is the recipient of six honorary degrees in addition to numerous awards, honors and commendations. Much of his life and impact can be read in his recently published book *From Protest to President*.

**Rachel Kobus** 01:10

And here we are with two-time alum and an ISU honorary degree recipient, Dr. George Pruitt. So Dr. Pruitt, what's the word, Redbird? Can you share a little bit about yourself?

**George Pruitt** 01:21

Sure, I'd be happy to and thank you for having me. I grew up on the south side of Chicago. I was born in a little town called Canton, Mississippi. Most Black folks from Chicago, their families are from Mississippi, and if you go into Mississippi in the summertime they're full of cars with Illinois license plates because people are visiting their relatives and in my case my grandparents. So I grew up in, you know, two places, particularly during the time that I was there, that were segregated, oppressive, and violent and that certainly shaped my view of things. I went off from - after I graduated from Hirsch High School in Chicago I went off to the University of Illinois in Champaign and I was there for my first five semesters of my undergraduate life. When I went to Champaign there were 35,000 students and only 250 Black students there and I don't know if - I never heard or saw of any Black member of the faculty. I transferred the second semester of my junior year to Illinois State University and it changed the arc of my life. And I would like to believe that the things that happened there that I was involved in - or hope - with a lot of other people also changed the arc of the university.

**Rachel Kobus** 02:49

I agree with that.

**George Pruitt** 02:51

I'm really proud of that. When I got to ISU there were about 17, 18,000 students and only 135 Black students and we wanted to address that and so we organized the Black Student Association. I was elected the first president and we promptly took over the president's office. The president's office issued our non-negotiable demands. It was just what you did in that period. There was a lot of tension when we did that, because we didn't know what to expect, but fortunately, we were lucky that Sam Braden was the president of Illinois State. He was an extraordinary man and he set his team to negotiate with us and out of that came the HPS program and a lot of other things. But that's how I got to ISU, that's how I started in the activism that I think has continued to this day. Actually, it probably started before I got to college.

**Rachel Kobus** 03:55

Oh, I'm sure.

**George Pruitt** 03:56

When I was at Hirsch we were part of the first organized boycott of the Chicago Public Schools in 1963, so I actually started in high school. But people say that I'm a product of the 60s, I like to say the 60s were a product of us.

**Rachel Kobus** 04:13

I like that, too. That's very inspirational. You're very right. Well, and we're gonna dive in a little more about your career and how you've become one of the longest-serving university presidents in the United States, but like you said, it started maybe in high school, but definitely at Illinois State University, and, you know, there's a reason you received an honorary degree from ISU and remind you, Dr. Pruitt has six honorary degrees, but one is from Illinois State University and you've done extraordinary things in your career and you touched on this a little bit, that the great impact started when you were a student. So can you talk about your time, you mentioned this, as a student negotiator, when you tried to focus on that recruitment of the Black student population at Illinois State and working through those policies to make a more diverse and inclusive campus for Illinois State? What was it like to be in that position?

**George Pruitt** 05:06

Well, it was a great privilege. I had some extraordinary classmates, people like Al Perkins and Deborah Lindsey and Ron Montgomery and Jim Tate [James Tate], who I had gone to Hirsch with. When we started that we were we, didn't know what we were getting into. It actually started me in higher education because when I went to ISU, I majored in biology, I minored in chemistry. I saw my future in the, in the sciences, I was, had seriously looked at being a doctor from the time I was five years old. When I was born in Canton my uncle was the only Black doctor in town. He delivered me, I'm named after him, I followed him around everywhere. I helped him deliver a baby out in the country when I was 12 years old.

**Rachel Kobus** 05:54

Oh, my gosh. You really were on that path, then?

**George Pruitt 05:57**

So - oh, absolutely. But when I got to ISU and we began to engage with each other first about what we wanted - to make the kind of Illinois State University that we wanted to have, the kind of ISU we thought it could be but it wasn't, and fortunately, we were - when we issued our demands, on the other side of the negotiating table was some wonderful people that I think were kind of waiting for us to do what we did.

**Rachel Kobus 06:30**

They just needed you to -

**George Pruitt 06:31**

We didn't know that at the time. We didn't know whether we were gonna get arrested, we didn't know what, are we gonna get pulled out of school, we didn't know whether we were going to get beaten. And all of those were possibilities and all of those things were happening to other students and other universities that were doing what we were doing. So we didn't do it lightly, it was very, very intentional. But fortunately, President Braden picked two people to be on the other side of that table. One was a guy named Paul Wisdom, who was an extraordinary guy, and the other one was another Illinois State University icon, Kenneth A. Shaw, who graduated from ISU, went on to be a president at Southern Illinois, president of the University of Wisconsin, and had a distinguished career as president of Syracuse. His nickname was "Buzz." And that's where I met Buzz and Paul, and the negotiations turned into collaboration. And the thrust of our quote demands were in three areas: we wanted to increase the number of African American students. It was just horrible that the oldest public university in Illinois only had 150 African American students. We wanted to increase the number of students and we wanted to increase the number of faculty and staff. Charles Morris was, is a wonderful -

**Rachel Kobus 07:53**

He is, yes he is.

**George Pruitt 07:54**

[Cross talk, inaudible] He was a professor of math. Kim Cox [Delano Kimberling Cox] was in the biology department, Harry Shaw was an advocate administrator and also a graduate of ISU. Those were the only three African Americans there and they joined with us and were very supportive of what we were trying to do. So we wanted to increase the numbers of students, faculty, and administrators. The other thing we wanted to do was we wanted a thorough examination of the curriculum at ISU so that it was more factually artifactual about the conditions of our country, our history, our evolution. We wanted some diversity in the curriculum and the scholarly work of the university. And the third area, we wanted attention to what I call student life issues so that Illinois State and the Normal community would be a more hospitable place for people of color. We also had concerns about the city of Normal. Housing was restricted for people of color in Normal. There was an open, there were open housing marches that came from faculty and students into the Town of Normal. Marchers were attacked. George Taylor, who would have been recruited from Howard University as Assistant Dean of Students, George was hit in the face with a bottle.

**Rachel Kobus 09:18**

My goodness.

**George Pruitt 09:19**

So when people look at quiet, sleepy, nice, peaceful Illinois State, it was none of those things when we were there and we did what we did at great risk. And what the wonderful thing about it is, we were able to engage in the institution with willing partners. We weren't - we loved the place, we weren't trying to attack it or tear down, we wanted to make it better. We found partners that wanted the same improvement and we had a colleague and friend in Sam Braden and in Buzz Shaw and Dick Bond [Richard R. Bond], who was the dean of the faculty, and Richard Hulet, who was the vice president of Student Affairs, even Eric Johnson, who was very reluctant to come to the table, who was the administrator of finance vice president. So a lot happened because of that partnership, and the arc of that university, at least from my judgment, culminated when the university chose Al Bowman as its first African American president. Al got appointed president, he made a comment that the best thing for him was that nobody noticed that he was Black. I, you know, I had, at the time, and I still have, I pushed back on him on that. I said, Al, you may not have noticed, but everybody else noticed. And the arc of that started with what we did in 1967 through 1970 and I'm very, I'm very proud of it.

**Rachel Kobus 10:45**

Yes, yes, and you should be and now you see ISU for what it is today, that there's still obviously always time to grow but there's so much that has grown because of the impact that you and, like you said, the few fellow students there, and one of that was you continued on at Illinois State, helping with the High Potential Student program. That is something that came out of your negotiations and working with Illinois State. So can you talk about how that program and what it is and how it made an impact at ISU?

**George Pruitt 11:16**

Well, that yes, that was the centerpiece of the student recruitment initiative. We wanted to attract African American students there but our challenge was to make sure we found people that could deal with the institution, that not only had the the intellectual capacity to do that - that was the easy part - but we also needed to to find students that had the self-concept, strength, and fortitude where they could deal with the alienation and isolation of being, living in a goldfish bowl at a place that at least was, at best was indifferent to us and at worst overtly hostile to us. And we, so we had to deal with, find students that could be successful in the university as it was, not as we wanted it to be. And we created teams of students to go back to their home communities and use their relationships and their credibility to talk about what we were trying to build and ask people to be a part of it. And we were very successful and we doubled the enrollment of African American students in one year and we started the High Potential Students program, that was the name of it. Charles Morris was the titular director, but my job was, operationally I was responsible for running it. You know, I talk about this in my book, and I need to plug my book.

**Rachel Kobus 12:43**

Oh, yes, please. I was gonna plug your book in the next question, but you go for it first.

**George Pruitt 12:46**

At the end of my career, as you mentioned, I was president of Thomas Edison for 35 years. I wrote a memoir, and the memoir's entitled *From Protest to President*, and the protest part of that, which actually led to the presidency, all of that started at ISU and that's why I'm so happy to be here, because I wanted people that love the ISU of today as I do know how it got to be that way and the struggle and effort and risk and energy of a whole lot of people over a long period of time that got it that way. And not only did we recruit the students that we did with some intentionality, the word that out and so we began to attract other students and a momentum that built. There was a serious and genuine effort to recruit faculty and staff, people of color, to come to the campus and that created its own momentum. We were also concerned about the quality of the student work, of the students that we got. We did not, we wanted people that would be successful and there were, and so we were really concerned that these students be, were high-achieving, and the graduation rate of the HPS students and grade point average of the HPS students was higher than that of the university average.

**George Pruitt 14:16**

Not only did these students survive, they excelled, and I was happy about that. There was a, there was and still is this false dichotomy that to increase access you have to lower standards. That is not true and it's unfortunate where people make that assumption and do that. The challenge is, there's plenty of talent, it's a matter of tracking and recruiting them and giving the students the conditions to be successful and they will be and they were at ISU and I was very, I was very proud of that. After I was there for a while I went to school while I was working with the HPS program and got my master's from Illinois State University. And part of the group that I worked with on the other side of the table began to leave. James Fisher, who was also a ISU alumnus, went away as president of Towson where he served his ten years, transformed the institution, wrote, became one of the nation's leading authority on the presidency, wrote 14 books on the presidency. CASE, the Council for Advancement of Sports Education, there's a James Fisher award in his honor. So when Jim left ISU again, where he graduated, and went to Towson, he took Buzz Shaw with him as his [cross talk, inaudible]. Paul Wisdom went with him as his chief advancement officer. I ended up following a year later as dean of students. That's how I got into higher education. [Cross talk, inaudible] I mean about the entire arc of my life changing, I abandoned my pursuit of medicine. I also figured out along the way, and I still love the sciences today, I've been on the boards to hospitals, health care, I'm still invested in it, the science and medicine fascinates me, but I figured along the way that I really didn't want to be a doctor. I wanted to be my uncle because I idolized him. If he had been a plumber I would have wanted to have been a plumber. But when I was at ISU, and in that period with those people that I worked with, and experiences that I found my calling and it changed my life and everything that happened after that started with the transformation that happened at ISU. I really mean that when I say that it changed the arc of my life, but I also mean it that we changed the arc of Illinois State University too.

**Rachel Kobus 15:47**

That's amazing.

**Rachel Kobus 16:46**

Yeah, and that's, what I was gonna say is, it, I really encourage our listeners to find *From Protest to President* and Dr. Pruitt's story because I've only gotten halfway through and it is very inspiring and it

very much tells what it was like, what it is today, and not just ISU but higher education in general, what has been impacted and how you, Dr. Pruitt, have been a champion among that too. So again, and we can call you our Redbird and our alum, and we're very fortunate for that. And it made me laugh, I have to just say this, it's very random, maybe derail us a little, but it made me laugh a little bit when I was reading a part of your book when you were given the honorary degree at Illinois State and you said it was extra touching for this given all the trouble and headaches you gave the campus leadership. And I laugh because in the end I think Dr. Braden, a lot of the administration, were there to celebrate you and your honorary degree too. So as much as you were humbled, you, like you said, there was an arc and an impact that you made on ISU that people recognize that, but for you to still say, I laughed at the headache part because I thought that was, I thought that was a little chuckle right there.

**George Pruitt 17:54**

That was special because, you know, I hope the book reflects that the struggle we had was not easy. I write about in the book, I was put in protective custody because my life had been threatened. There's a very interesting article in one of the ISU publications talks about the Days of May, the flagpole incident, and I was right in the middle of that. We had become attached, very close to Fred Hampton, the activist leader in Chicago, who was killed by the police and when Fred was killed it was a deep personal loss to us. It was not just another assassination in a decade of assassinations. It was close and personal and a guy named Lonnie Pruitt, who was a freshman - and Lonnie and are not related, but we would laugh about that - he was a freshman, Lonnie was hurt, heartbroken, and he just went to the flagpole and lowered the flag to half mast. And it was just an act of, he was angry, he was hurt, there was no thought to it. And I found out that he had done that and I went and joined him and so the two of us stood there and then as we stood there others came and joined us. That led to a lot of demonstrations, a lot of drama, some violence, although I'm proud to say that of all the transformation that took place in Illinois State, we were the only public university that had no significant violence or property damage, while other campuses were literally on fire. I was in President Braden's first class when I got my baccalaureate degree, then his last class when I got my masters. He was an extraordinary man and I'm delighted that that facility is named after him. Usually you don't get your name on a building after just a few years as president. So literally when I had dinner with him the night before the, it was important to me because I kept Sam Braden up a lot of nights, me and my colleagues. He, the one downside of that is that he decided that after all he went through with us he didn't want to be a president anymore and he resigned and that was a terrible loss. But it's a statement to him and the importance he was at steering the school through such a pivotal time that he was celebrated. So when I had dinner with him, I also told him some things about some events that he didn't know about and how they happened that he, I guess, he said, he found really interesting. But the things that went on in my career, I left Illinois State and went to Towson State, Morgan State, a historically Black college, and Tennessee State. Went through - I want you to get to the chapters of the book about Tennessee State, because that was a very dramatic and historic kind of transformation. Well, and I think you'll, we'll talk again, after you read that part of the book.

**Rachel Kobus 21:15**

Okay, sounds good. I was like, let's not let's not spoil it, either. We want people to read the book too. But good to know, it's like, content, drama! But that's what it's all about, is it takes, it takes courage, it takes vision, it takes structure, and it takes drama, and it takes tragedy to make something as impactful

as what you went through. So even when you talked about President Braden being there for three years as it maybe took a toll on him, but you and the campus and President Braden I think did great things for ISU, like you said, so it takes a lot and I don't think people realize that until they get to read some part of history from someone that actually went through it that helped create it. So I was going to keep saying thank you throughout our whole interview. But then, you know, you moved on and, like you said, into different administrative roles, higher education became your path and your calling it seems like, and then I kind of wanted to change gears, you went from empowering the traditional student and those maybe underrepresented but in a different capacity as you went on into the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, I believe, which instead focuses on adult learning. So what made you interested in a non-traditional student and their learning path?

**George Pruitt** 22:40

Well, it started, it actually started a little bit at Towson. Towson was the second largest public institution in the state, second only to Maryland, College Park. And they had, it was a traditionally student body, but they had an evening program. And I taught an evening class at a local military base. And we had a snowstorm in Maryland, and in Maryland, as we were talking earlier, and the East Coast, particularly in Maryland, in Baltimore, Washington, they freak out if there's a heavy dew, let alone a snow storm. They just close down, I mean, they just - so I'd never heard of the schools being closed, because the entire time I was in Chicago, at college, I never heard -

**Rachel Kobus** 23:24

Yeah, you just go -

**George Pruitt** 23:24

[Cross talk, inaudible] So I taught this evening class and Towson, they canceled classes, and I thought, well, maybe they may not have gotten the word. On my way to my car - I was going to make its class anyway, so I drove to where the class was - on the way to my car I could hear the students celebrating that classes were out and heading into the bars around campus, they were just happy. You got to this course, class, and the entire, everybody was there, every single [inaudible], even the ones that had heard that the school was closed. And they were angry, they were anxious about that. What do you mean cancel classes? We paid for this course. If we cancel classes are we going to make it up? Do we get a refund? [Cross talk, inaudible] this is different. When I got, when I was at Tennessee State I was approached by some colleagues that came, that I had known at CAEL about would I worked with them to try to get the involvement of historically Black colleges in the adult learning movement, because most historically Black colleges are traditional age students. Tennessee State as it was in Nashville and Morgan State as it was in Baltimore were in metropolitan areas with access to adult student populations. And that's where I got involved with CAEL, when I left Illinois State, I'm sorry, when I left Tennessee State, I went to CAEL as executive vice president and chief operating officer. And what I found was a whole nother universe, but there is an ISU footprint even in that. If you look at the scholarly work that the whole adult education movement is based on, you'll see right in the middle of it K. Patricia Cross. Pat Cross was an distinguished Illinois State alumnus. She was one of the leading scholars and she actually went to Harvard and she was writing as a faculty member at Harvard, but she's an ISU graduate student who had great influence on the conceptual and theoretical research that the whole adult learning movement was built on. Well, that was another ISU thing, and when I came back to get



inducted in the ISU Hall of Fame I was there with Pat Cross, and with Jim Fisher [James Fisher], and with Buzz Shaw and with Jim Koch [James Koch], who went on become president of Old Dominion and Montana, University of Montana. So there's, even there, there's a connection back to Illinois State and all of that. And so when the presidency of Thomas Edison - Thomas Edison was an institution that was created exclusively to serve mature adults and so it was a natural fit for me given my work with CAEL to come here and I stayed here as president for 35 years. The theme that connected all of that - and, you know, when you write a book, it gives you a chance to reflect and you see themes in your life that you're not aware about while you're living your life.

**Rachel Kobus** 23:25

Yeah, yeah, I would think so.

**George Pruitt** 23:29

And the theme that has kind of been through all that, going back to Mississippi, in Chicago, in two geographies and political circumstances and historical occasions that were oppressive. Where you could live, where you could go to school, what jobs you could have, were all constrained by your race. And I hated it and I spent all of my life trying to empower people and knock down barriers. At the end of the day, the future of this country is going to depend upon the quality of its human capital. We cannot afford to exclude anybody. And so it was perfectly consistent to be president of an institution and be part of a movement that was trying to open up access to higher education to what is the majority of the population of the United States. And today most college students today are over 25 and going to school part-time. So there has been a transformation of higher education and I've been a part of that as well, but it's a continuation of the original theme. How do you open up the academy? How do you open up Illinois State and Towson State and Morgan State, Tennessee State, and the country to an educational system that's focused on quality but also focused on on creating access and opportunity so that we don't leave anybody out or leave anybody behind?

**Rachel Kobus** 27:39

Yeah, because like you said, the talent is there, we shouldn't lower standards, it's finding the resources because everyone can succeed and everyone can have that say. It's making sure that everyone has the accessibility to do it. So I think that's very, very wise to share, yes.

**George Pruitt** 27:54

And not all of that means going to college. I think it's a mistake to say that the purpose of higher education is to get a job, you get an education. And people that have a higher capacity out-earn people with lower capacity and higher education builds capacity. But everybody has talent of some sort and skills and interests of some sort and there are diverse institutions - some are colleges and universities, some aren't colleges and universities, some are technical schools and community colleges, but there are a variety of institutions by which everyone needs to be challenged, to find out what their competencies are, what their talent is, and go to institutions that will develop that talent so that they can have a quality of life and that we can have a productive society where everyone's engaged and invested.

**Rachel Kobus 28:50**

And they need mentors like you. I mean, it's true. They need people like you, they need champions and they need people to keep, like you to tell them that too. So it's very empowering, because I think majority of the world doesn't have people saying that to them. And just those few words, I think, can change someone's mind that I have the skills and capacity to do something great. So I think we have to remind ourselves that to that it just takes a few words to say there is something for everybody, you just have to work a little harder to find it if you want to excel in whatever that is, so.

**George Pruitt 29:23**

I do believe that the challenge is to make people understand and realize the fact that they are the architects of their own future and their own lives. You have to own that and your lives are definitely a function of the decisions you make. But you only really have a choice if you perceive that you have a choice. And so there's two challenges for us: to make sure that all of us understand that we do have choices and what those choices are, because there's a lot of people in our society that don't believe they have a choice about the lives that they live and they do, and then the other is, once you get them convinced that yes, you can be the architects of your own future, then how do you give them the tools and assets and support for them to create their own destiny for themselves and let them be the architects of it and to own it.

**Rachel Kobus 30:11**

Yes, agreed. And so I want to go back maybe to more of the end - there's so much in between in Dr. Pruitt's career and we're hoping to get more of a written story and very much encouraging *From Protest to President*, it's a great book and a lot more we can't cover, but I want to get to the part and ask you this question because you mentioned challenges. As a president of a university for 35 years, going through your whole life so far, what has been some of the biggest obstacles you've had to overcome? What have been your biggest challenges?

**George Pruitt 30:45**

Oh boy, that's a lot, that's [cross talk, inaudible].

**Rachel Kobus 30:47**

Or maybe just in presidency, what has been your - maybe that helps you a little bit.

**George Pruitt 30:51**

There's no preparation for the presidency.

**Rachel Kobus 30:53**

Okay, yeah.

**George Pruitt 30:54**

The other thing too that's kind of weird about the office, you are selected for criteria based on - that are useless to you once you get to the office. So you don't get this job because you're good at this job. You get this job because you were good at the last job.

**Rachel Kobus 31:09**

Got it, all right.

**George Pruitt 31:10**

This job's very different than the last job or any other job you've ever had. And so the presidency is layered, people understand the CEO role, the management role, the executive role, to make sure that the budgets balance, that you don't misspend the money, that you recruit students, that the lights come on, that the physical plant and infrastructure, they understand that role. But they don't understand is the role that the president is much more - the presidency is much more important than that. It's the president's responsibility to articulate and organizing visions of the institution, in a sense of mission and direction for the institution, to articulate what the institution's values are, to build a productive institutional culture that supports scholarship and civility and diversity, and even dissidents and argument, but in a way that is empowering as opposed to in a way that's combative. And doing all of this by figuring out how to pay for it and managing the politics that are associated with it. And so it's a very complicated and complex [cross talk, inaudible].

**Rachel Kobus 32:21**

Yeah, not challenging at all!

**George Pruitt 32:23**

That's right. You know, I think there's a section in the book where I introduce Tom Kean, who's the former governor of New Jersey, Tom [cross talk, inaudible] nice editorial endorsement of the book. Tom Kean was an extraordinary governor, best governor I've ever seen or worked with, and I've been in a lot of states, I worked with a lot of governors. I introduced him to an American Council of Education meeting and I made that comment, I said he was the best governor I'd ever seen, but I told him, I said, Governor, you need to know my, understand my background before you get bigheaded about that complement. I left Illinois and Governor Kerner went to prison and I went to Maryland, I left Maryland and Governor Mandel went to prison and I went to Tennessee, I got to Tennessee and Governor Blanton went to prison, so really, all you have to do is stay out of the slam to be at the top of the my list. Fortunately, Tom Kean has a sense of humor and New Jersey has some of the most colorful politics that you ever seen, and again, I grew up in Chicago so I know about politics. But the, one of the challenges of the academy today is that the complexity of the presidency, it has gotten more complex and the capacity of people that have been attracted to this office has not kept up. And so that gap has created the highest turnover in the presidency in the history of the country. So that's not good for higher education, that's not good for the country, and that's not good for the society, but it is one of the most rewarding jobs in the world that you can have if you can figure out how to do it right and if you're there for the right reasons and bring the right things to the table. Too many people that are in the job now are there because it's the cherry on their resume. [Cross talk, inaudible] driven by ambition. When I was waking, when I was ringing Sam Braden's doorbell at three o'clock in the morning as I did one night because there was a crisis that had happened, and he's coming down the stairs in his pajamas, that's probably why he didn't want to do this anymore, but he, it was also very clear he was not in the presidency because he wanted a big office or car. He was there because he deeply believed in the power of that institution to help and empower people. That's why he was there, not to have the big office or the car or the recognition of the flags to go with the office, it was his personal commitment to

service, [inaudible] ambition. And that's complicated now for a lot of people that aspire to the office, but it is a very challenging, difficult job and it requires people with special temperament and not everybody can do this, so.

**Rachel Kobus 33:48**

Yeah. But you did, 35 years.

**George Pruitt 35:21**

I did.

**Rachel Kobus 35:23**

Yeah. Is it true, and I can't remember this, and you also work with other president, or those that are interested in presidency for higher education and help mentor and help them along the way to understand all these challenges, correct?

**George Pruitt 35:38**

Yes, I mean, I was very clear that I had a very accelerated career. I mean, when I went to Towson as dean of students at the second largest, oldest college and second largest university, I was 24 years old. I was, when I became president I was 36 years old. I can't find many people - I mean, there are few - not many people ascend to the presidency at that age. Interesting banter I've had with both Buzz Shaw and Jim Fisher, who I considered my two most important mentors - we lost Jim several months ago, but Buzz and Jim not only became mentors of mine, they became two of my closest friends - I was aware that I had such an accelerated career partly was because of the mentorship I have experienced, talented people that saw something in me even that, before I saw it in myself, and I was committed - all along, in my [inaudible], I've been in my career I've been committed to try to do for others what was done for me. So I have been involved in the mentoring of leadership, trying to develop leadership, my entire career. I was one of the founders of the Millennial Leadership Institute of the American Association of State College and Universities, I worked as an advisor in the Kellogg National Fellowship Program, and in my post-presidency assignment, sometimes if you're around, hang around a long time, they do nice things when you leave. So I come to this beautiful office in this really nice building with my name on it. You're supposed to have modesty and try to say something humble about that but I gotta tell you, it's really cool.

**Rachel Kobus 37:24**

Oh, I bet, that's nice. Like, this one's mine, right here. Thank you, everybody.

**George Pruitt 37:29**

But what I have tried to do in the work that I do now is to continue that. I have a, teach a senior executive higher education masterclass for higher education executives that I think are one step away from presidency. It's a very small class, it's only five students a year. I'm in cohort five now. These are wonderful peoples who I think can go on to make great presidents. And I also have sort of a, the popular word is coaching, but I don't think what I do is coaching, I can't think of a good word for what I do but I'm reminded of that term out of The Godfather, consigliere. So I'm sort of a consigliere to nine sitting presidents, and range from large research one comprehensive institutions to a small historically

Black college in the South. So I'm continuing my mentoring work. One of the reasons that I wrote the book, I have not had a quiet academic life and when you build up a portfolio of 50 years of engagement like I have, what do you do with it? Well, I've, what I've tried to do in the book, and what I try to do in my ongoing work is to take those experiences and pass it on and so that hopefully someone else will benefit from it and prosper from it and will understand some things that worked for me but also to avoid some things that didn't work for me.

**Rachel Kobus 39:01**

Yes, we learn from our mistakes, so.

**George Pruitt 39:03**

And it's very fulfilling work and that's why I'm active and as - and I'm going to keep doing it as long as my faculty stay with me and there's a need or demand for what I offer. But I'm wonderfully blessed and fortunate for that. And again, back to where you are, all of that for me started in Normal, Illinois at Illinois State University.

**Rachel Kobus 39:25**

I know, it's amazing. And so I want to finish on this question: so did you ever imagine you'd be making this much progress as a leader for social justice for higher education when you were that young man growing up in Chicago, coming to Normal, Illinois later on in life?

**Rachel Kobus 39:43**

I bet!

**George Pruitt 39:44**

Didn't have a clue. There was no plan. Didn't have a clue. It was Buzz Shaw and Jim Fisher when I was at Towson that began talking to me about the presidency. And again, it was not because of aspiration to the office, it was about what's the kind of contribution you want to make and what kind of service do you want to offer and what's the best platform from which to do that? And they encouraged me that the presidency of an institution, given their knowledge of me and of my understanding of me, and my appreciation and respect to them, was something I should consider. It didn't, that's the first time it ever crossed my mind. So no, I had no, I had, it's been as fascinating to me to watch me as well.

**George Pruitt 40:18**

I had, I got, I came, I was offered the opportunity to lecture at Harvard one day, and I'm sitting in the Faculty Club at Harvard, I'm talking to the Harvard, this Harvard faculty member, and there's a section in the book about that. When I finished my lecture this faculty member came up to me and thanked me, [inaudible] appreciated what I had to say, and when he walked away my host said do I, did I, I was telling him, he asked me what this guy said, and I told him. He said, oh, do you know who that is? And I say no, he said, it's David Riesman, one of the most important sociologists the country's ever produced. And I'm standing there thinking, I'm looking at the Harvard Club and I'm thinking about 79th Street on the Southside of Chicago. I'm thinking about this little, my grandmother's house, the railroad tracks in Canton, Mississippi, and I'm thinking, I just didn't know what to think. I kept thinking, this is a long way from 79th Street.

**Rachel Kobus 41:45**

And it took - but, you know, it took a lot to get there and a passion and I mean, in, I feel you, from your book, from listening and talking today, I think you're pretty deserving of it, Dr. Pruitt, too. So and what I want to point out that you've kind of created a theme today as we talked is, it's about believing in yourself, but having support. All the names that you've mentioned, always having, you know, an ISU alum, always thinking about where you came from, having all these different friends and connections and having mentors and people to talk to, it's about having a village to build you up and make sure of where you're at as well. And then you continue, like you said, to make sure you are giving your time so others can have that too. So I think it's very important to point that out, that being an educator needs that support.

**George Pruitt 42:35**

Yeah, you know, and I get back to Fisher and Shaw, if you ever had a chance to know Jim you would think he grew up in a country club. I mean, he was polished, well-dressed, articulate, quoted Greek philosophies [inaudible]. He flunked out of ISU - he flunked out of Milliken. He flunked out of Milliken, went into the Marine Corps, came out, came to ISU after he graduated, met President Bone, graduated from ISU, went and got a PhD in Psychology from Northwestern. Bone remembered him, recruited him back to Illinois State, and I mean, his impact on higher education has been extraordinary. Buzz Shaw from Edwardsville, Illinois, came to ISU to play basketball, was, graduated third leading scorer in his school's history, was a basketball player. President Bone saw something in this kid. And Jim and, Jim became president of Towson when he was 37. Buzz became president of Southern Illinois University of Evansville when he was 37. And I teased them I beat them both, I was 36.

**Rachel Kobus 43:55**

I was gonna say, it sounds pretty close to you, huh?

**George Pruitt 43:58**

My point is, if you look at these two guys who also came through Illinois State, they created their future that they, if you had talked to any, either of them when they were undergraduates at any school they went, and you had told them what the arc or their career was going to be, they would have laughed at you. So that's important, you don't have to have a certain pedigree, you don't have to come from wealth, you don't have to come from privilege. It doesn't matter what your background is, as long as you're prepared to take ownership of what you do with what you have. One of the things, one of the chapters in my book is titled, "It's Not About the Cards You're Dealt, It's How You Play the Hand."

**Rachel Kobus 44:42**

Right, I like it. It's very true. So with that, do you have anything else you'd like to share before we say goodbye? It's been amazing and, you know, a privilege to talk to you. I will say, that is, my privilege is to talk to you today, so if it's been eye-opening and I truly appreciate it.

**George Pruitt 45:03**

Well, you're very kind, and I appreciate you and your work. I appreciate the work at the university. I really, I want to say this: you know, when I left the University of Illinois and went to ISU, it was culture

shock, it was going from life in the big city to the small town. But there's no question Champaign is one of the great public research universities of the country and deserves accolades for that, but there's no question in my mind, the quality of education I received at Illinois State was far superior to what I experienced at the University of Illinois. Illinois is great if you're a grad student in for research, but if you're an undergraduate, it's an ant colony. And I had never really had a sit-down conversation in a classroom with a member of the faculty until I got to ISU. I was at these big lecture halls. There was a distinguished author and professor down on that stage that I never gotten a chance to speak with, so.

**Rachel Kobus 46:01**

Not at ISU! At ISU you get - yeah.

**George Pruitt 46:04**

Absolutely. Well, so I want, but I do want to, I'm grateful to Illinois State and what happened to me there and what it allowed me to do. That could have gone a different, totally different way if Sam Braden had been a different kind of president and the university response have been very different, that could have gone a totally different way. So nobody does anything by themselves and it's a matter of being committed to something and had the good fortune to be associated with other people that shared [inaudible] to build you up. And then you have an obligation, that old saying, "To whom much is given, much is required." And I have been given a lot and I know I'm very fortunate for what I've been given and I really hope that I'm doing my best to try to return it.

**Rachel Kobus 46:04**

Well, great. Well, thank you for sharing. I think just today you've given some great words of wisdom and again, I hope everyone goes and looks at your book, *From Protest to President*. And with that, I thank you again for being on our show, Dr. Pruitt, and I look forward to seeing what you do and maybe your next 30 years, maybe outside of presidency, let's see what happens next.

**George Pruitt 47:21**

Well, okay. You and me both. Thank you, take care.

**Rachel Kobus 47:40**

That was two-time alum, honorary degree recipient, president emeritus, and social justice champion, Dr. George Pruitt. Thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz and tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.