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get inspired

# BizNOW

inspiring the creative business leader

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**From Congress to  
Augustana President:  
*Stephanie  
Herseith-Sandlin***



# Fearless & FEMALE: Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin

She was the youngest female to serve in the House of Representatives, and the first woman elected to the House from South Dakota, serving from 2004 to 2011. Now she's making history again as the first woman to lead Augustana University in Sioux Falls in their 157-year history. Former Congresswoman Stephanie Herseth Sandlin will take over as president this summer, after her role as general counsel with Raven Industries since 2012. The appointment was made by the Augustana Board of Trustees following a national search.

**Stephanie, you've made history in your new role as the first woman President of Augustana University. Describe your journey.**

I think my calling to Augustana is a way of coming full circle for me. When I pursued a joint degree program in law school followed by two federal clerkships to begin my career more than 20 years ago, I did so at the advice of those who knew I wanted to teach. Political philosophy and constitutional law were my passions and I believed that education would be my vocation.

The call to public service interrupted that plan, but it was an incredibly positive and rewarding interruption. I will be forever grateful to have had the opportunity to serve the people of South Dakota.

My time at Raven allowed me to strengthen and broaden my business skills. I had the opportunity to build a new legal department, engage deeply in strategic planning, strengthen our governance practices and help lead a major acquisition.

Those are all experiences and transferable skills that I'll bring with me to Augustana.

**How has your political career prepared you for this opportunity; what lessons have you learned?**

When I campaigned, I didn't believe I had all the right solutions to issues affecting voters. What I did was listen and learn and ask questions in order to build context and understanding.

I believe that relationships are key to driving progress and building understanding. In order to understand why someone feels a certain way, you have to understand who they are, what's important to them and what challenges they may be facing. I have tremendous faith in the power of empathy and I feel especially blessed that God gave me an extra dose of it. As a result, it's easier for me to engage in more constructive dialogue because I've come to appreciate that most issues are multi-faceted, and if one dismisses others' opinions, complex problems become even more difficult to solve. At the same time, as a leader you have to make decisions after careful and thoughtful analysis, and then have the courage of your convictions to communicate effectively the reasons for your decisions.



Photo courtesy of Augustana University

So, listening, learning, understanding, decisiveness and communication are all tested skills and abilities I hope to use effectively at Augustana.

**How is South Dakota viewed in the national arena?**

South Dakotans' are consistently admired for their work ethic and authenticity as well as a strong sense of community and generosity. While certain misperceptions may linger about our region of the country, it's up to us to continue welcoming others to experience and embrace the quality of life that Sioux Falls and different communities across South Dakota have to offer.

**What would you like to say to young women to encourage them to break barriers?** To really drive change, we need to work together. So I would tell young women – and young men, as well – to find positive role models and mentors to help them develop their professional skills, build character, and hone their areas of expertise. Become part of a support system in which you have the opportunity to be mentored and, one day, make sure to be a mentor to someone else. When you assume a leadership role, think of it as an opportunity to hold the door open and make it wider for others to walk through.

It's also necessary to take risks. Success is never guaranteed, but without taking risks, it's harder to grow personally and professionally. It takes courage and confidence to take certain risks, and role models and mentors can help enhance both.

**Does gender still matter in the workplace today? Do women have an equal shot at achieving their dreams?** The answer is “yes” to the first question and “increasingly so” to the second. Certain conscious and unconscious biases are held by both men and women—toward women in the workplace today. There is a greater appreciation for the value women bring to the table, which has opened up more opportunities for advancement, however statistics confirm that for some professional positions, barriers still remain. If we empower girls when they're younger and if we are even more deliberate in their coaching and career development, the pace of breaking barriers will be accelerated.

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**How can women empower each other?** Believe in each other. Seek to help and encourage our female colleagues, not be hard on them. Too often, women focus on where they may have shortcomings rather than on the depth and breadth of their experience or the sheer talent they have to offer. Point out to other women their strengths and potential in order to cultivate and reinforce the confidence necessary to take on the next challenge. And learn from one another. Be willing to share your own experiences and life lessons because we all juggle our ambitions and obligations in different ways at different life stages.

**What is your vision for Augustana?** I'm excited to work with the campus community to execute the five-year strategic plan, including the goal to advance technology at Augustana, as they find methods to deliver in new and different ways.

I believe higher education needs to embrace technology because it is changing the way young people learn. I see that every day when I talk with my son, Zachary (8), about his day at school. I look at the emerging role of technology in healthcare and I think of Augustana's new graduate program in genetic counseling. I think about how technology has changed the way we communicate and share information. I think about how young people – and their parents – are using technology in their college decisions.

**South Dakota is recognized as a top spot for entrepreneurship. What is the University's role in preparing youth to be entrepreneurs?** AU's role is to instill and reinforce in students a set of core values – values designed to serve as a compass throughout their lives, and especially as they interpret and analyze information in building complex solutions for complex challenges.

Augustana helps students discover their passions, explore their vocation and chart their own course. We challenge students to become critical thinkers and effective communicators. Through experiential learning opportunities like study abroad, internships and volunteerism, they learn about different cultures, workplaces and needs, which inspires action, drives change and fosters innovation. I believe this approach to entrepreneurial-minded education is what sets Augustana apart.

**What is your “best failure” and why?** My defeat in the 2002 general election for Congress to the late Governor Bill Janklow. I honed my debating skills against an exceptional communicator and South Dakota political giant, I kept the race competitive in a tough political environment, and I applied lessons learned from the loss to the victory I experienced in 2004, including how to be a more credible voice on issues important to the nation and South Dakotans.

**What is I thing you know now that you wish you'd known when you first started your career?** The importance of accounting and how helpful a foundation in the basic principles of accounting can be in many different aspects of business and organizational leadership. Related to that, I came to appreciate even further my legal training and background, and the relationship between law and accounting in business and decision making.

**Favorite quote on leadership?** One of my favorite quotes, often attributed to John Quincy Adams, is “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.” ♦