

From the Pentagon to Saddam Hussein's palace to Fever president, this is Allison Barber's life

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INDIANAPOLIS — Allison Barber sat in the "situation room" tucked away in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. The conference table was massive. The mood was serious. Condoleezza Rice loomed at the head of the table.

Rice was stern on this day. She was displeased. The office of global communications she wanted set up in Iraq and London wasn't happening fast enough for her liking.

Torie Clarke, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and Barber's boss at the Pentagon, looked Rice straight in the eyes.

"When I want something done, I give it to Allison."



There was no vote. There was no asking. Barber soon found herself in a flame-resistant jumpsuit and helmet in a military plane diving nose first, doing cork screws, as it landed in Iraq. It was tougher for the enemy to shoot it down that way.

She walked into the palace of Saddam Hussein where her office was located to work with generals and other military leaders to set up a media center.

She spent nights at the palace of Hussein's son, her head on a pillow, thinking back to her days as a first grade teacher, a swim instructor, a PR guru.

And in those dark nights surrounded by war, her dad's words would echo: "Take it to the hoop, kid." That was his way of saying, you can't achieve anything if you don't drive toward the goal — in basketball or life.

Barber had always lived by those words. And they had taken her places in her career she never imagined she would be.

In March, they took her to the Indiana Fever. As the team enters its 20th season, looking to reinvent itself, Barber is the woman charged with making that happen as president and chief operating officer of the WNBA franchise.



"She is a leader. She's a thoughtful, all-encompassing, determined, inclusive person who understands the needs of people," said Rick Fuson, president and chief operating officer of Pacers Sports & Entertainment. "And she understands what it takes to get them to march with her."

The Fever position is Barber's eighth career. Not her eighth job, her eighth career.

"This," Barber said from Bankers Life Fieldhouse last week, "is how a career evolves in ways you cannot imagine."

First love: Basketball

On a shaky home video from the 1970s, Barber jumps up from the spot where she sat just moments before next to a Christmas tree ripping open a gift. Her first basketball ever. And a hoop outside.

A 10-year-old Barber tries to spin the red-white-and-blue ball on her finger. She is ecstatic. Barber remembers it as if it were yesterday.

"That was a dream come true," she said.

A native of Schererville, Barber grew up in northwest Indiana, where her immigrant great grandparents settled from northern Iraq. Barber's childhood was the stuff dreams are made of.

Her mom was a school teacher; her dad was in construction management. Life was chores and ice cream cones, good grades and a lot of love.

Most of Barber's time was spent in the driveway, shooting that basketball over and over. There were no teams for girls. So, she settled for dragging her older sister out to play when she could.

She played in the winter in the snow and on the ice, one time almost knocking herself out when she slipped and fell. She ruined many parkas, much to her mother's chagrin.

Barber still shoots hoops on a basket down the street from her condo, often with one of the three refugee children whose family she and her husband have unofficially adopted.



She's been shooting on that same hoop for two years. The neighbors used to come and go, not saying a thing. Now that she's president of the Fever, they stop and watch. "How's it going Allison?" "You making many baskets?"

"Oh my goodness," she said. "Now the pressure's on."

Of course, Barber is quite used to pressure.

The start of a winding career path

A school teacher is what Barber wanted to be, what she thought she would spend her life doing. She headed to Tennessee Temple University to get her degree and there — finally — she got to play organized basketball on an intramural team.

As she was set to graduate, she found out her department of education banquet was being held on the same night her team was playing the championship basketball game.

Her plan was to skip the banquet. Then Barber learned she had been selected as the student teacher of the year. Her mom insisted she go to the banquet.

"I was madder than mad," she said.



Her basketball team lost that night and to this day, "I like to think I had something to do with that," she said. "I'm not sure. I'm not sure that's the right assumption, but I like to think it."

After graduating, Barber came back to Indiana and took a job as a first grade teacher in Merrillville. Her husband Linden — she met him in fourth grade, went home and told her mom that she didn't like him but that she would one day marry him — was a graduate of the University of Notre Dame's law school.

"He's practicing law. I'm teaching school," she said. "It's like, oh yeah, this is exactly how Hoosiers do it. From immigrant to great grandchildren who have opportunities galore."

Barber moved to teach second grade, then sixth grade, all the while coaching basketball and track and any other sport she could.



But then everything changed. The first Gulf War broke out and Linden came home one evening. He looked at Barber and said: "I really want to serve the country." The two quit their jobs, Linden joined the Army and the couple moved to New Jersey.

"I was proud of him for wanting to do it," she said. "And that just led us to a very different path than we had originally designed."

A path that Barber never saw coming.

Reinventing herself

In New Jersey, Barber was lonely and looking for a job. She found herself walking into Macy's just to talk to the perfume sample ladies for company.

She needed to figure out what was next for her career. She had always loved sales, cold calls. Her first job was at 8 when she ordered seed packets from a magazine. She had seen a car for sale for \$2,400 in the newspaper. She needed to start saving for that car.

She went door to door. It was winter in northern Indiana. After rejection after rejection, she went to her great uncle's house.

As only a great uncle would do, he said, "Honey, I was just thinking about buying seeds today." He bought out her supply of seeds.



So in New Jersey, Barber went on more than 50 interviews — door-to-door sales, acting in commercials, temp services in New York City, car sales. None clicked. She started volunteering for the Red Cross, something she'd done since she was 16 years old.

It wasn't long before Barber was offered a job at the Red Cross' national headquarters in Washington, D.C.

From there, her resume is one of determination and reinventing herself as she took a series of new jobs, new careers. She moved from the tissue services program to public relations for the Red Cross to opening up the organization's ad agency.

When she quit that job because Linden was told he'd be going to Germany with the Army, only to find out they still needed him in D.C., she set out looking for a job again.



She wanted to continue to volunteer, help a friend with her new son and be there for a dear friend with brain cancer. Barber started her own PR consulting business, a tiny cubby hole in her home with a fax machine.

That little business led to a part time job with Hill & Knowlton, one of the most prominent PR firms in D.C. Which led to the day Barber walked into her office to a stack of binders sitting on her desk. They were all from the U.S. Department of Defense. A little note was stuck to those binders. "Want to go with me? -- TC." That was Torie Clarke.

The White House had asked Clarke to be the spokesperson for the Pentagon and they told her she could bring one person as her assistant. Of course she thought of Barber, who always got things done.

Inside Clarke's office she looked at Barber: "Do you want to go with me?"

'They are so stuck with me'

This became the opportunity for public service that drew Barber in.

"I joke that I bleed red white and blue," she said. "How can you not? When your great grandparents give up everything they know to come to a country so you have a future, how do you not love this country that made that happen?"

She started at the Pentagon in May of 2001. One of her first assignments was to help write a strategic communications plan for missile defense. Her next was to help get Americans excited about supporting the military.

Then the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks happened. Her job changed.

"But I never lost sight of what people sacrifice for our country," she said. "And for our freedom."



After 20 years in D.C., the Barbers were ready for a change of pace. She had started teaching at Georgetown University, but the couple was looking to move back to Indiana to be closer to family.

Barber was connected with then-Gov. Mitch Daniels. He wanted to start Western Governors University Indiana. Barber was the perfect person for the job.

While at the helm, Barber grew the school from 250 to 5,000 students, enrolling people from all 92 counties in Indiana. She was chancellor for eight years and, in her ninth year, started the university's foundation.

Then, the Fever called. This would be her eighth career if she took the job.

"And eight is my favorite number, so I think the Pacers, well, I'm never leaving," she said. "They are so stuck with me. This is the career I have been waiting for."

Fever 2.0

Barber is halfway through the thank-you notes. When she came on board, she learned that 78 season ticket holders have been with the team since its beginning.

She is writing each of them a personal note of gratitude. "They have believed in us," she said. "I appreciate that loyalty."

The mission now is to build on that. To bring in more fans. To create excitement around this Fever team and its new 6-7 center Teaira McCowan, its talented young players. Barber has former Fever star Tamika Catchings as her vice president of basketball operations.



Barber calls that a "gift." But that means Catchings isn't on the court, which makes Barber's new role vital.

"When you lose your star player like that, a franchise player, a future hall of famer, we kind of have to rethink things," said Fuson. "We have to regroup in

terms of the basketball team. Regroup in terms of the community and support."

Fuson said he has no doubt that Barber will be able to rally the city and state to become excited about their WNBA team.

"We need to make sure we are hitting every place in this community," he said. "Leave no stone unturned, make sure we find these fans."

Barber said many people look at the Fever all wrong. A company at 20 years old is just getting started, she said.

"Sometimes people will try to compare us to the NBA and that's the wrong comparison," she said. "Look at us against 20-year-old companies and we are doing great."

It's time, she said, for her to help improve on that greatness, using everything she learned from those previous careers.

"It is time," Barber said, "for Fever 2.0."