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April 2013: Small Talk. Big Ideas.



"When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." When Estella Gillette was ready, a university appeared.

Estella began working for NASA Johnson Space Center as a secretary, and there she remained for 40 years as she worked her way to become a senior staff member. Her rise in the organization was the result of many things, but could easily be distilled to two key factors that are, in fact, intertwined. She will share her story and lessons learned at the "[Small Talk. Big Ideas.](#)" breakfast conversation event to be held at University of Houston-Clear Lake on April 10.

She was surrounded by people with degrees, including advanced degrees. She began a long, steady pursuit of higher education, and came to UHCL when she had enough credits from San Jacinto College (called San Jacinto Community College at that time). She had only nine credit hours remaining at the time of the Challenger tragedy in 1986 and believed she would need to stop because of the changing dynamics of her

work responsibilities. Her husband encouraged Estella to talk to her professors. She received her bachelor's degree in 1986. At commencement, she watched a colleague cross the stage to receive her master's degree and immediately felt, "I can do that, too." She earned her master's degree in 1994.

"The master's degree gave me choices," Estella said. "Make choices for yourself, and don't let others make them for you."

One of her early choices defines another key factor to success: belong to your organization. Her stories of how to belong are rich, including bold and sublime wisdom about how she worked to become part of the organization, the culture and the family that composed NASA. The things that she learned, complemented by her innate wisdom about people and relationships, helped her rise in the organization and assist others in their careers. Gifted in relating to people, she shares her insights with others. I tell everyone, "You can't make changes if you're not a part, and you can't be a part if you come in making changes."

UHCL has been there for students when they are ready to grow. Then, as now, when individuals want to take seriously the role of education in the development of their lives, the choice is clear as to where to be: UHCL. Beginning in fall 2014, the university will also begin admitting freshmen and sophomores for the first time in its history.

Learn from several university alumni and friends, and from university leaders about things that matter to you by coming to "[Small Talk. Big Ideas.](#)" Teachers appear here every day.



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We love stories. Human stories. Funny stories and dramatic ones.
Would you like to share *your* UHCL story? We would love to listen.