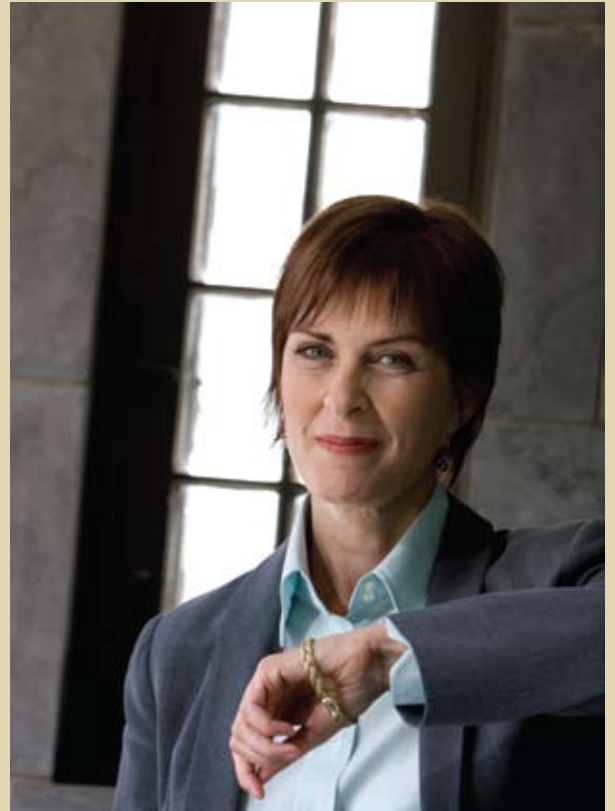


“Success is a team effort”

Advises first female principal of Montreal’s McGill University



Dr. Heather Munroe-Blum

When UNC School of Public Health alumna Dr. Heather Munroe-Blum talks about leadership, she speaks of “team effort,” “principles,” and “new possibility.”

“Look for people who bring different things to the table than you do,” she advises young leaders. “Bring together people who add experience that you don’t have, but who share your values and principles, your sense of where you’re going and of new possibility. Success is a team effort. I believe you’ll always have a smarter plan working with others than thinking it through by yourself.”

Aspiring leaders may want to heed this advice. Munroe-Blum knows a thing or two about the topic. As the 16th principal and vice-chancellor of McGill University in Montreal and the first woman to hold the position, Munroe-Blum, 57, has been holding leadership positions for the better part of her career.

In 2003, she was awarded Canada’s highest civilian honor by being named an Officer of the Order of Canada and cited as one of

the country’s “most influential spokespersons for universities in matters of research strategy and policy.”

Prior to accepting the position of principal and vice-chancellor at McGill, she served at the University of Toronto as professor, governor, dean of social work and finally as vice-president of research and international relations. Earlier in her career, she was clinician, lecturer and assistant professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and before that, at York University in Toronto.

On May 10, Munroe-Blum, who holds a PhD in epidemiology from Carolina’s School of Public Health, will give the commencement address for the School’s graduation ceremony at 5 p.m. in Memorial Hall on the UNC campus.

When asked about Carolina, Munroe-Blum says, “I chose to come to UNC-Chapel Hill because it had the first-ranked epidemiology program in the world in 1978–79. The quality of the graduate education and doctoral program at Chapel Hill remains today a gold standard for what graduate education should be.”

The supportive mentoring Munroe-Blum received at Carolina had lasting impact on her, she says.

“The best thing that a great teacher and great educational experience can give to a student is to help them see talent and possibility in themselves that they would otherwise not see,” she says. “Dr. Bert Kaplan, my doctoral supervisor, did that for me. He said, ‘You’re going to be president of a university some day.’ His philosophy was that he was learning as much from us (the students) as we were learning from him. I have tried to practice this in every role I’ve been in ever since, with everyone I interact with.”

Kaplan, professor emeritus of epidemiology at Carolina, describes Munroe-Blum as “a natural leader, distinguished scholar and eloquent teacher.”



“I’ve been blessed with great students, and she’s one,” he says. “Heather knows herself and knows how to be prepared. She is very creative. She brings her unique gifts to all relationships and responsibilities. She is an exceptional leader who is sensitive to others’ feelings and needs.”

Munroe-Blum’s character may have been developed, in part, by a challenging childhood. Her mother was left to care for her and her older brother alone shortly after her birth in Montreal. At age 3, after some time in foster care with her brother, Munroe-Blum contracted polio and had to be placed on an iron lung. Doctors were unsure if she would walk again. With the help of a family friend, Munroe-Blum’s mother arranged for her to live with and receive physical therapy from a retired British physiotherapist. The therapy was contrary to the prescribed treatment of the times which advocated bed rest. But when Munroe-Blum came home just before her fourth birthday, she was able to walk with braces, and later fully recovered.

Married for 37 years to screenwriter

Leonard Blum, Munroe-Blum and her husband have a 22-year-old daughter, Sydney, an environmental economics master’s student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

Munroe-Blum is passionate when speaking about the role that universities play in the development of communities.

“Universities fuel our social, cultural and economic institutions, and they help design the shape of our communities,” she said in a speech at her installation as principal of McGill in 2003. “Universities promote the free exchange of ideas and encourage open and meaningful debate. The health of democratic society, our society, depends on that debate and exchange. Universities wrestle with our most difficult problems, and formulate solutions to dilemmas across the spectrum of human activity: Who controls the media? How do we sustain a life-giving environment? What is the role of the free market? How can we cure cancer? Universities have become the defining institutions of modern life—because universities devote themselves to finding deeper definitions,

Dr. Heather Munroe-Blum, the first woman to hold the position of principal and vice-chancellor of McGill University in Montreal, speaks to students on McGill’s campus. Munroe-Blum is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill’s doctoral epidemiology program.

deeper meanings and deeper resolutions.”

When speaking about the way education can change lives, Munroe-Blum is equally passionate. It’s a topic that has affected her in a personal way. Her mother, Dorothy, won a scholarship to McGill years ago—an honor that her Irish Catholic immigrant father did not allow her to accept.

“She was an extremely bright woman who thought that education was a powerful vehicle for transforming lives,” Munroe-Blum says. “She never did go to university because that’s not what women did then, in her circumstances. Her father was very traditional. She went to secretary school instead. By being at McGill now, I take great satisfaction in some completion of that cycle on her behalf.” ■

— BY EMILY J. SMITH