

2021 Carmen Powers Legacy Lecture

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I started at MCC in the fall of 1972, an 18-year-old Rochester native taught primarily by nuns and an odd assortment of lay teachers. When I say ‘odd,’ I mean the biology teacher who called me “an advocate of the devil” for embroidering a peace symbol on the pocket of my school blazer. There was also the theology teacher who gave me a week’s detention for asking a visiting contingent of Aquinas boys their opinions on legalizing abortion. I said I was just curious. The teacher said I was “brazen.”

When I began at MCC that fall, my dad, a Kodak machinist who had dropped out of high school to join the Navy during WWII, wasn’t happy. Not because I was starting college – but because I was borrowing his shiny, pale green Chevy Nova, the first new car he could ever afford. I wasn’t borrowing it occasionally – I was taking it every single week day. I would drop him off in front of the gates of Building 135 on Dewey Avenue, promptly change the radio station and be heading to MCC’s Brighton Campus before he dumped his brown paper lunch bag into his work locker. He was a good guy – a really good guy so he never said he resented me taking his car – but I suspected that underneath his quiet demeanor was a brewing resentment. I overslept one day and he had already left when I raced downstairs. That’s when I knew that my dreams were strictly my own. When I’d told my mom I wanted to be a journalist, she said I’d be better off taking secretarial science – that I should be practical – that I’d always have a job. So I did. I took typing, shorthand and business law – and I didn’t last the semester.

Instead, I got a job working nights as a machine operator at a plastic molding manufacturer. My parents were thrilled I had found full-time employment. I was just resigned to the fact that college was for other people – smarter people – luckier people. I was a young, very sheltered Catholic girl thrown into a rowdy mix of hard-drinking, tough-talking, grease-under-their-fingernails guys and women who held their own – their language peppered with eye-popping expletives as they crocheted or shared their homemade cookies in the breakroom. I didn’t finish college right away but I remain grateful for all that I learned from the colorful folks on that B shift crew. I learned a lot.

My dad died when I was 32. I had been published a few times by then and written an article about him that appeared in the D&C. That article, below a picture of my dad, hung in my parents’ modest Cape Cod house for years. After struggling with a contentious relationship through my late teens and early 20s, we had slowly built a far better bond. At the end, he was enormously proud.

I was 33, divorced, remarried and the mother of three when I visited MCC’s Admissions Office again. My heart nose-dived as Pete Otero sat across from me at his desk looking down at the dismal transcript of my first attempt at college. I was mortified knowing his gaze was now fixed squarely on the procession of soldier-straight F’s that marched down the page. But he looked up at me with a broad grin. “You’re ready now,” he said – not a question but a confident statement spoken with enthusiastic conviction.

And I was.

MCC changed my life the second time around. I gained confidence here. For the first time, I was surrounded by people who believed in my potential. Tom Proietti, Lesta Wren, Barry Goldfarb, and Carol Cloos, always so generous with their praise and counsel, became friends. Like countless MCC studentparents, I wasn’t satisfied just attending college – I worked very hard to earn good grades. I felt

fortunate to have the advantage of maturity and a wonderfully supportive husband – the kind who didn't just say,

“Sure, you can go to college” – the kind who did dishes and laundry and helped the kids with their homework – so I could do well.

The year I graduated, I received the Rice Award for best creative nonfiction essay and the Rochester Area Colleges (RAC) adult student award (Health Sciences Instructor Patty Dano and I were two of the three MCC recipients that year).

But I wasn't done yet. Let me stop here. I know this is supposed to be about my employment at MCC. I'll get to that, I promise. But for me, being an MCC student is where my professional future was born. It's where I dug in, found my direction, immersed myself in growing beyond the goals that others had set for me. It's where I gained confidence, built on what I was good at and figured out that if I studied five times as hard as anyone else, I really *could* pass statistics.

I went on to SUNY Geneseo and SUNY Empire State where I eventually earned a bachelor's degree in cultural studies with a concentration in American Literature. I became a newsletter and Total Quality Management consultant and a freelance writer with clients in Rochester, Buffalo, New York and Niagara Falls. But after seven years at the same small company, I wasn't challenged anymore; I was bored.

In 1995, I applied for a temporary position in MCC's public affairs office and joined the College permanently a year later. The following February, I was one of the 16 employees who were told their positions were being eliminated. That was a rough time. I remain extraordinarily grateful to those fellow Faculty Association members who voted to forego their annual raise to save us. Because you didn't just save me – you saved my house, my security and my family. You kept our heat on, you kept us out of the government cheese line at the firehouse. Because I kept my job, you made it possible for all three of my sons to graduate from college. You reminded me that doing the right thing is always better than doing the easy thing – because for most employees, the easiest thing would have been to keep their annual increase and ignore the more than a dozen at-risk colleagues who would have been destined for the exit. That vote made me believe in the power of solidarity but also reminded me of the goodness in people. There have always been an abundance of good people at MCC – there still are. Twenty six years have passed– more than a quarter century of press releases, president's remarks, student interviews, and social media posts later, it's my turn to leave. But before I lock my office door, allow me the opportunity to share a bit of advice:

Make friends. You work too long, too hard, and with too much passion not to find a few kindred spirits – a few hearty, generous souls to be your work tribe. On the best days, they'll share the joy and on the worst days they just might save you.

Answer your emails. There are people who don't. They're known for it. Be known for your collaborative spirit, your intellect, your creativity, your colorful socks or your infatuation with Starbucks... Trust me, there will come a day when you need someone's assistance and people are way more inclined to help you if you have a reputation for being habitually dependable and responsive.

Be your own advocate. When a MCC president was invited to give remarks at the presidential inauguration of a former MCC dean, I was charged with drafting the speech and given access to the person's personnel file. Flipping through page after page, I was struck with how often – and how clearly he had stated his goal of becoming a community college president. He hadn't let anyone forget, particularly those people in power, his professional ambition was to lead a community college. I deeply

admired his professionalism and tenacity; I still do. If I have one tiny regret about my MCC tenure, this is where it sits. I was always naïve enough to think that if my efforts deserved recognition, they'd get it. Silly me. Don't make the same mistake. Stand up for yourself. Value your own self-worth – not in an obnoxious way – but with purposeful confidence in your unique contributions.

Practice positive motivation. Don't try and motivate others through intimidation. That's not being a leader – that's being a bully. It might get the job done a few times. But it won't inspire loyalty or innovation. If people are scared of you, they'll never do their best work. If you supervise people, find out what they're good at and allow them to shine. Find out where they want to go and help them get there. You want people to succeed because you helped champion their abilities – don't be the roadblock they're forced to overcome. Be fair. Be ethical. And as corny as it may sound, be kind.

Build a happy life. Bad work days happen. Sometimes, bad work weeks happen too. I've been extremely fortunate for the strong ties of community, the loving support of family and friends and the haven that's my home. The richness of my experiences outside the workplace always helped refuel me – and helped sustain my enthusiasm for the work I did here.

I can't finish without mentioning a few extraordinary people.

Carmen Powers. The last time I saw Carmen Powers, I was walking through Parking Lot A when she pulled up alongside me, leaned out the window of her Bug and said, "You look sad. Smile! And don't take any sh#& from the people in there!" I laughed – as she waved and drove away. Carmen was funny, irreverent and an extraordinary mentor to her students and I'm truly humbled to be taking part in the Legacy Lecture that bears her name.

Rosanna Yule aka Coffee Buddy. For 19 years, we've been warrior-sisters in promoting MCC as the wonderful, life-changing institution we know it to be. This year, Rosanna became the recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Professional Service. She deserves it. She also deserves my infinite gratitude for helping me sustain the necessary strength, creativity, and enthusiasm to help the College move forward.

Colette Fegan. No one was more dedicated to this College and no one had more fun working here. Colette is the stuff of MCC legends – an indomitable spirit, a force of nature, a sensitive soul and a dear friend. Did we sit out in the back parking lot at MCC's first Homecoming listening to the SkyCoasters and smoking cigar slims? Did we enjoy an annual tradition of martinis at lunch around the holidays? Maybe.

There are so many others. You know who you are. I love you all, I'll miss you all and if you ever find yourself in Albemarle, North Carolina, you've got an open invitation to come and sit on my porch.

Finally, to every single one of my MCC colleagues: never doubt your importance. Never doubt the impact of your work. You aren't just changing the lives of our students. You're transforming the futures of their families and the communities in which we live. Keep doing what you do. Every day. The best you can – because it matters. It's been a rare honor and privilege to work alongside you.