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Peggy S. Meszaros:
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'paying it forward'

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By Robin Roenker

Peggy Sisk Meszaros remembers being intrigued by the family dynamics of her friends and classmates even as a very young girl.

"When I was 10 or 11, I remember wondering, 'What makes some families successful, and other families not so successful?'" says Meszaros, a Hopkinsville native who received her master's degree in home economics (family and consumer sciences) from the UK College of Education in 1972. "I looked around at my friends and saw some of their lives seemed to be very successful — their parents and home life were happy. But others seemed to be always challenged. I wanted to figure out what was going on and attempt to discover if there was anything I could do to help bring about more successful families," she says.

One of the driving forces behind Meszaros's long and accomplished career has been investigating the ramifications

of that dynamic. Why is it that some families succeed while others struggle?

High-profile career

Since 1977, when Meszaros received her doctorate in education focusing on human development from the University of Maryland, her passion for family sciences has taken her to the head of classrooms and administrations across the country.

In her first post-doctoral role, Meszaros served as the Maryland state supervisor of home economics and consumer education (1977-1979), overseeing a statewide program of 450 teachers, principals and superintendents. She then joined the faculty at Oklahoma State University, where she served as associate dean of Cooperative Extension (1979-1983) and as director of academic affairs for that university's College of Human Environmental Sciences (1983-1985).

Returning home to Kentucky,

Meszaros was dean of the UK College of Human Environmental Sciences between 1985 and 1993, where she was instrumental in pushing for the college's name change (Formerly, it had been called the College of Home Economics.) and oversaw rapid gains

in student retention, research endowments and private donations during her UK tenure.

"I bleed blue," says Meszaros. "I love Kentucky. It's home to me. I literally gave my life to the university during those eight years. And I was so pleased by the quality of the faculty we were able to attract, with the growth of our student numbers, and with the research that was being done."

In 1993, Meszaros left UK to become dean of the College of Human Resources at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (VT). Two years later she was, as she puts it, "propelled" into the role of senior vice president and provost at VT, where she was at the time — and still remains — the highest ranking female administrator ever to serve on that campus.

"The provost is literally the person who runs the university on a day-to-day basis," says Meszaros, alluding to her responsibilities in that role, which saw her overseeing VT's 25,000 students, 1,500 faculty, 3,000 staff and \$600 million annual operating budget. "I was in that role for six years, and I had the privilege to work under a wonderful president, Paul Torgersen. But when he retired in 2000, I was fortunate to be named an Endowed Professor of Human Development as I returned to teaching and research." I was determined that I was going to now try to do everything academically that I had been professing to all faculty that they should do," she says.

Peggy Meszaros, center, standing with Mike Burlison, left and then UK President Charles Wethington, was inducted into the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni in 1995.





Photo: Jim Stroup

Namely: Do research; find funding.

"I felt I had to prove myself," Meszaros admits. "And I think I have done that."

Indeed, after stepping down as provost and stepping up as an endowed professor, Meszaros became director of her own research center at VT — the Center for Information Technology Impacts on Children, Youth, and Families — a role she's maintained for the past 13 years. As its name suggests, research conducted through the center focuses on the ways that information technology shapes modern family dynamics (impacts of cell phone use, desirability of information technology (IT) careers, what it means to be a "wired" family today, etc.).

To date, the center has secured over \$6 million in external research funding, including a large-scale, \$2.5 million National Science Foundation (NSF) supported project that has Meszaros and her team investigating why it is that young girls are not actively pursuing careers in IT fields.

"Currently, only 25 percent of the IT workforce nationally is made of up females. And we have discovered that some of the reasons this may be so have to do with gender stereotyping

and the lack of knowledge of parents, teachers and counselors about the range of jobs available in IT," Meszaros says.

The current study is being conducted across five Appalachian states: Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia. "What we've found from our previous research is that the girls have the same ability, the same interests, and the same access to computing as the boys, but the more these girls talked to their parents, teachers and counselors (about potential careers), the less likely they were to choose an IT career," she said.

The girls, Meszaros believes, are getting outdated, gender-stereotyped messages. "They're being told, 'You don't want to do that. That's a boy's field. You don't want to sit in a corner with a computer,'" she says. Her goal, then, is to help develop programs to educate parents, teachers and school counselors in these states about today's wide-reaching IT fields and the wealth of job opportunities they provide — to both men and women.

"I'm passionate about helping females," Meszaros says. "Of course, I care about helping males, but the problem in the IT pipeline is with recruiting more females."

Meszaros's enthusiasm in rededicating herself to research following her provost years at VT has been inspiring to her colleagues there.

"When Peggy stepped down from the provost position, she stated that she planned to reinvent herself, and she proceeded to es-

tablish her center," says her colleague, Rosemary Blieszner, associate dean of the Graduate School at Virginia Tech. "Her research agenda has been very ambitious and very successful, yielding important findings especially in relation to participation of women and girls in technology fields. She is an impressive role model for many faculty at VT."

Paying it forward

It was during her years as a master's degree student at UK that Meszaros met and studied under Marjorie Stewart, a professor who would become her mentor and source of lifelong inspiration.

"Marjorie was the dean of the College of Home Economics and really taught me how to be a successful administrator," Meszaros says. "She was simply a wonderful person. She took me to professional organizations — what was then called the American Home Economics Association. She paid my way to the meetings. And she supported me in my research. When I graduated, I asked her what I could do to thank her, and she said, 'What you can do for me is to do for others what I did for you.' So that has been my guiding principal: to always try to be a good mentor to students," Meszaros says.

She was inducted into the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni in 1995, having reached the pinnacle of her profession. For her efforts to establish endowments to cover the costs of research travel expenses for UK Human Environmental Sciences students, among other contributions to the university, Meszaros was honored with a UK Alumni Association Distinguished Service Award in 2011.

And the message of 'paying it forward' is one that she contin-

The Meszaros family is a UK Legacy family with Louis T. Meszaros graduating in 2008 from the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment.



ues to encourage her own students to adopt.

“Dr. Meszaros lives her mission to help others achieve their goals. Equally important to her vital research on IT opportunities for women in Appalachia are her teaching and mentoring roles. In return for her kindness, time, dedication and support of students, she only asks that we ‘pay it forward’ to others in the future,” says Monica Kimbrell, a VT doctoral student who is studying under Meszaros.

In addition to her research on IT career opportunities for women, Meszaros focuses on developing community-based prevention programs to combat adolescent substance abuse. Her center’s programs, being implemented as a model in Virginia, target kindergarten through high school students, in an attempt to educate them about the dangers of tobacco, drug and alcohol use.

The real-world applications of Meszaros’s research aren’t simply happenstance. A driving goal throughout her career has been finding ways to apply the knowledge gleaned from her research to make real, perceptible, positive impacts on the lives of others.

“I believe so much in the land-grant mission, which is, we don’t just do research in isolation. The land-grant mission is to take that research out to make a positive improvement in communities,” Meszaros says.

The role of Cooperative Extension has also been a constant within Meszaros’s career. In each of her administrative roles at Oklahoma State, UK and VT, she has been charged with direct oversight of those universities’ Cooperative Extension programs.

“My big NSF research project is really based on the Cooperative Extension model, which is, again, charged with taking that

research out from the university and finding ways to enact positive change in the communities you serve,” she says.

“Peggy has elevated the level of scholarship in our department,” says Anisa Zvonkovic, head of the Department of Human Development at Virginia Tech. “Her research work is important, and it has clear practical implications to improving the lives of adolescents and young adults in specific communities, as well as across the country.”

Family ties

Meszaros’s personal path to obtaining her degrees wasn’t easy. She earned her master’s degree at UK while her husband, Al, was on his second tour of duty in Vietnam and she was home alone, raising three young children. To earn her Ph.D., she drove evenings and weekends to the University of Maryland’s campus, while supporting herself by teaching full time at Hood College in Frederick, Md. Before this, Meszaros taught home economics and science at a middle school in Hopkintonville, having obtained her bachelor’s degree in education from Austin Peay State University in 1963.

She and her husband moved 17 times in 20 years during his military career. During a three-year deployment to Germany, they traveled extensively to countries throughout Europe. When he retired from the military in the late 1970s, he told Meszaros that since she had followed him for the first 20 years of their marriage, he



Photo: Jim Stroup

would follow her wherever she wanted to go for the following 20, she says.

While she lost her husband five years ago, Meszaros cherishes family time with her two daughters and son, her seven grandchildren and her three great-grandchildren, who live in Maryland and Georgia.

In her spare time, she enjoys escaping into a good mystery novel, especially those written by her favorite authors, Jonathan Kellerman and J.D. Robb. She is also an avid exercise enthusiast, rising five mornings a week at 5 a.m. to get a workout in before starting her day at work.

“I started working out in earnest five years ago. I went from a size 12 to a size 4. I can do chin-ups and dead lifts up to 165 pounds,” Meszaros says proudly. “I also eat very healthfully. I want to live to be 100.”

And, with years of experience doing what she loves, Meszaros has no plans to slow down.

“I love what I’m doing, and I’m not bored at all — even though I’ve been at Virginia Tech for 20 years, the longest I’ve ever been anywhere,” says Meszaros. “My interest has just always been in the human sciences. And that’s where all my energy has gone. And it’s been a wonderful career.” ■

At VT, a National Science Foundation supported project has Peggy Meszaros and her team investigating why young girls are not actively pursuing careers in IT fields.