



Deeply Rooted

Water, history and culture shaped Deborah MacLatchy, Laurier's incoming president

BY ROSE SIMONE

PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

It was almost inevitable that Deborah MacLatchy would have a bred-in-the-bone love of history and water, growing up in Wolfville, N.S., a community that dates back to the mid-1700s and is situated near the Bay of Fundy and the Minas Basin.

The tides run high there. "I had a deep sense of the water being such an important part of our ecosystem," MacLatchy says of her childhood, when she was fascinated by fish and kept an aquarium. But she also

breathed the rich Acadian history surrounding her. When she began university, she was torn between studying history and pursuing her interest in the biology of fish.

The fish won and took her on a journey into scientific research. That led her to Waterloo, nowhere near the ocean, but with another asset, Wilfrid Laurier University, which offered her a position as dean of science in 2007.

While continuing her research in ecotoxicology and comparative endocrinology, she rose quickly through the administrative ranks at Laurier. Two years after her arrival, she was promoted to vice-president academic and provost. MacLatchy, 52, is being promoted again, to the top position, as president and vice-chancellor of Laurier.

When she starts her new job in July, succeeding Max Blouw, who is finishing his second five-year term, she will be one of the very few women to be a university

president in Canada.

Academia has always been a strong part of MacLatchy's life, as central as her affinity to water. Her father, Cy, a physics professor at Acadia University, and her mother, Ann, a teacher and English major, encouraged all three of their daughters to pursue as eclectic an education as possible.

"They encouraged us to study everything. We took a mix of sciences and languages, English, history, math and all the rest of it," MacLatchy says. All three are highly accomplished. As Deborah, the eldest, becomes a university president, one younger sister, Laura, is an anthropologist and professor at the University of Michigan, and the other, Heather, is a clinical psychologist in Nova Scotia.

After getting a science degree at Acadia, Deborah MacLatchy went on to pursue her passion for understanding the physiol-

ogy of fish in her graduate studies at the University of Manitoba. She focused on the minutiae of physical mechanisms, specifically, how thyroid hormones work in fish. As she began her post-doctoral work, the phenomenon of endocrine disruption was an emerging area of important environmental research.

While in Winnipeg, she met her partner, Bill Campbell. He was a copy writer for an ad agency when he met her through mutual friends, and was instantly drawn to a woman he saw as both beautiful and intelligent. They moved together, first to Guelph, where she had a postdoctoral position and then to the University of New Brunswick where she was offered a tenure track position. She was a dean of science there when Laurier drew her back to Ontario a decade ago.

Campbell switched to freelance advertising work after they left Winnipeg. "With

my skills being reasonably portable, we decided that we would follow the opportunities for her career," he says.

Coming to Ontario was, in any case, a bit of a coming home for Campbell, 60, who is now retired. "I went to school in Oakville so I have friends in southern Ontario," he says.

This region is also rooted in MacLatchy's family history, through her grandparents on her father's side. Her father was originally from the Preston part of Cambridge, where his mother, a Shantz, met and married MacLatchy's grandfather, who had moved to Ontario from New Brunswick to go to law school. MacLatchy's grandparents retired in Waterloo and when they were alive she would make trips here to visit them.

It wasn't long before MacLatchy became a much-cited expert in her field. She has been published in more than 80 peer-reviewed publications and, in 2005, a

Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada award recognized her successes in fostering partnerships that help remediate the environmental effects of pulp-mill effluents. She is a founding fellow and past chair of the science directors of the Canadian Rivers Institute and co-lead of the ecotoxicology node of the Southern Ontario Water Consortium. She helped launch the Laurier Institute for Water Science.

"Sometimes in history you are at the right place at the right time and, for me, that was the area of endocrine disruption and ecotoxicology in the early 1990s when I was developing my career," she says. "We were then realizing that sewage treatment plants, pulp mills and oil refinery industries were putting contaminants into the environment that were directly affecting fish via their endocrine pathways."

She hopes to continue working with the young scientists in her lab after she

becomes president.

"I am still driven by curiosity and trying to get answers to questions," she says. "It is also important to remain grounded in what makes universities important institutions and to stay tied to the reasons that you are at the university in the first place.

"It allows you to lead while you are walking."

MacLatchy will most likely be leading Laurier into the completion of the long-sought-after goal of expanding Laurier's multi-campus presence in Ontario. There is already a campus in Brantford but, for years, Laurier has been working with the Town of Milton and other public and private-sector partners to develop plans for a campus in Milton. That is now much closer to reality.

She has led initiatives such as guiding a new academic plan and new budget

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model. “There is no denying that we are in a challenging funding environment,” she says. But she adds that the challenge can be met by continuing to grow the university’s graduate studies, attracting students who are a good fit, and finding ways to connect potential donors to programs they can feel good about supporting.

The movement from research to increasingly responsible positions in university administration “was a natural progression for a woman with her talents,” Campbell says. “She is very competent, intelligent and so she had the research and teaching but she had these other options as well.”

MacLatchy says she accepted the position as president because of a “deep resonance” for the institution and its values.

“I want to help Laurier be the best it can be going forward. Being president allows me to do that in a different way, by telling our story to government, to alumni, potential donors and potential students who will become the future alumni,” she says.

Moreover, MacLatchy believes women need to step up to the plate of leadership at universities. “It’s important that women who are qualified for these jobs not only step up to do them, but are supported by university communities to be successful in these roles.”

MacLatchy is the second female president in Laurier’s long history. The other was Lorna Marsden in the 1990s.

Only about 20 per cent of Canadian universities are led by women.

In Ontario, out of 21 universities, there are female presidents at Algoma (Celia Ross), Carleton (Roseann O’Reilly Runte) and OCAD (Sara Diamond). On the same day MacLatchy becomes president, Rhonda Lenton will take over the top job at York.

MacLatchy is also a champion of women in the sciences, believing strongly that diversity is needed to foster a wider scope of ideas and innovation. More women are now going into a range of scientific fields, but in sciences such as physics, math

and engineering, there are challenges to overcome, MacLatchy says. “It’s not related to whether young women can do the science. It’s more about the environment in which the science is being done. That is something we still need to work on.”

MacLatchy says one of her priorities as president will be to find ways that Laurier, especially with its campus in Brantford which is not far from Six Nations, can respond to the recommendations for universities outlined in the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.

She sees strength of character in a university that manages to balance liberal arts and science along with professional programs, such as those at the Lazaridis School of Business and Economics. It is also affiliated with the Balsillie School of International Affairs, which focuses on international governance.

Laurier has expanded a lot over the years, and now has some 19,000 students, but prides itself in fostering tight-knit relation-

ships. “When I talk to alumni from the ’60s and ’70s, all the way through to today, they talk about interactions they had with faculty and staff, and the lifelong friendships they made,” MacLatchy says. She wants that to continue in the decades to come.

MacLatchy also hopes to expand opportunities for Laurier’s students to study and work abroad and for students from around the world to come to the campuses here.

“We live in a globalized world and I think it is critical that Canadians experience other cultures, either in the classroom in interactions with people from diverse groups or in travelling abroad and having those experiences,” MacLatchy says.

Laurier has a number of niche strengths, in social work, music and music therapy, cognitive neuroscience, cold regions research, water science, as well as entrepreneurship, and sustainability in business. “There are so many things that Laurier does. I feel we have been very humble and have hid our light under a bushel for too

long,” MacLatchy says. Letting that light shine through will be a big part of her job as president.

It is also a university that complements the talent emerging from the University of Waterloo just down the street, she adds. Laurier’s business graduates have been crucial in seeding the region’s ecosystem of high-tech startups.

“We really do talk about Waterloo Region as an ecosystem and for me, as a biologist, that really means something,” she says. “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Both MacLatchy and Campbell love animals. Their household includes fish, cats and dogs. Campbell enjoys taking the two dogs, a Labrashepherd (Lab-Shepherd mix) and a Chocolate Lab, out for frequent walks.

Besides having an affinity for animals, MacLatchy also still loves history and historical novels. “That’s one of the

remnants of wanting to be a history major,” says MacLatchy, who was recently “totally immersed” in reading “Barkskins,” the latest novel by Pulitzer-prize winning author Annie Proulx. It couples historical fiction with environmental sensibility in a tale set in late 17th century Canada, when two penniless young Frenchmen arrive in what was then New France to become woodcutters, or barkskins. It is a tale of souls wounded by the destruction of a forest and caught between the native and European cultures.

Environmental, cultural and historical sensibility will be desperately needed in tomorrow’s world as well. MacLatchy sees Laurier playing a crucial role in fostering that holistic understanding and knowledge in future leaders.

“That will be central to us going forward,” she says. “With so many polarizing pressures on us globally, this will be critical in ensuring that we have the Canada that we want, 10, 20 or 30 years from now.”



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