10 QUESTIONS *for* GWEN MAHON

Gwen Mahon, who was recently named dean of the Rutgers School of Health Related Professions (SHRP), earned a PhD from Rutgers Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS), Newark, in 2006. She discusses the value of a doctorate in basic sciences and what her plans are for her new role.

What in your personal history has led you to where you are in your professional life?

This position is a dream-come-true for me. I love working with people, networking, and bringing people together. As the dean, one of my goals will be to build partnerships and bridges for faculty and students. While I have a passion for science, I am an eclectic person. SHRP is an amazingly diverse school with 42 programs spanning many different fields. This position affords me the opportunity to work with people from many different backgrounds, helping them to succeed. My family moved a lot while I was growing up and I attended different schools every three years in Canada, Ireland, and the U.S. So I am comfortable with change and enjoy the challenges of navigating new situations. This is a time of great change for our school, which provides immense opportunity but also requires adaptation to a new environment. I hope to help the school navigate through that change.

Which five adjectives would you use to describe yourself?

Determined, for sure
Eclectic—just look at my resume
Inquisitive
Goal-oriented
Sentimental

What first interested you in science/research?

I love trying to understand how things work and am fascinated by biology. I worked with my parents on mechanical things as part of family businesses while growing up. I was raised to not be afraid to break things down and figure out how to fix them. I started off wanting to be an astronaut, but in Ireland at that time, hard sciences (physics, technology, engineering, chemistry) were not offered in girls' schools—only biology. I was told it was not a realistic choice of career for me, one because I was a girl, but two, because I was too short. I am only five feet tall, but am still puzzled by that supposed limitation. Around that time, I got interested in medicine, nature, and biology.

We moved to Vancouver when I was 16 and I finished high school there and went on to the University of British Columbia (UBC) to study zoology. I was the first person in my family to have the opportunity to go to University. My first day at UBC was like a dream, and I discovered quickly that I wanted to spend the rest of my life at a university. I am an eternal student.

How did you get your start in the research world?

In the summer of my third year in college, I started working in a *Drosophila* genetics lab and discovered that I love doing research. I was fortunate to be mentored by several outstanding scientists at UBC. When I graduated, I worked in another genetics lab before starting my master's degree in the Terry Fox Laboratories studying leukemia. After earning my degree, I moved with my husband, Ian, to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. There I worked in the Department of Pharmacology and Radiation Oncology at the Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center. I learned a lot about research, but also about the politics of science, how you get grants, and the administrative workings of a university.

PHOTOS BY KEITH B. BRATCHER, JR.

Why did you choose GSBS for your doctoral degree?

In 1998, we came to the Newark campus. I became a research associate in the Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics. Harvey Ozer was department chair. He later became the NJMS senior associate dean for research and then the director of the NJMS Cancer Center, and was a faculty member at GSBS. He was a major influence in our lives. After working there for five years, I expressed an interest in academic administration and he mentored me every step of the way. He got me started—writing grants and working with senior administrators at NJMS. It was a whole other world, and I liked it.

I decided that I would like to be a dean one day. I discussed it with Harvey and decided to pursue my PhD. I chose GSBS because he, and the Dean of GSBS, were so supportive of my goals, and because GSBS faculty do fantastic science and graduates go on to have strong careers. Harvey was my PhD mentor. That was a little more than 10 years ago. Sadly, Harvey passed away recently. I will be forever grateful to him and will miss him dearly.

How did the doctoral degree from GSBS impact your career?

GSBS and my PhD have been integral to my career and my life. Kathleen Scotto, PhD, the Dean of GSBS, is a great role model for women in science. She understands that students are not just researchers; they have lives.

My kids were 2, 3, and 13 when I started and 6, 7, and 17 when I finished. I wanted them to have a role model, and I wanted to have a family life as well as pursue my career. Happily, it all came together. Over the last four years, I have been honored to serve as the GSBS Alumni Association president.

How did you become interested in administration?

In 2006, after graduating with my PhD, I became director of the research program at the NJMS Cancer Center. My job was to bring faculty together, to build infrastructure for research and research training programs, and to help get the research center up and running. It was a phenomenal experience. Then, from 2008 to 2011, I was assistant dean for research administration at NJMS, and in 2011, I joined the administration of SHRP as associate dean. I wanted to be more involved in education. For me, there were a lot of new things to learn at SHRP, and I fell in love with the school—its diversity, the phenomenal faculty, and the school's big impact on the health care community both locally and nationally.

What attracted you to your current position and what do you hope to accomplish?

SHRP is already tremendous—both in size and scope. It is patient- and family- centered, has a team approach, and does a lot of interprofessional education. I believe we can play a big role in building a new health care model. I also want to help the faculty be as good as they can be. Sometimes it can feel as though administrators hold faculty back. I do not want to be that kind of administrator. I want to help faculty network within the school and with faculty from other schools. I want to be the liaison between this school and the central administration. I want to put systems in place to help all faculty members reach their potential and all students to excel and feel supported.

What are your hobbies and outside interests?

I love jazz, classical, big band, rock, all kinds of music. I love to paint. I own a violin and want to learn to play it. I grow veggies and love to cook. Most of all, I like hanging out and chatting with my teenage kids, ages 14 and 16. Our oldest child is grown up and married and lives outside Seattle. Teens have a fresh perspective—they keep you honest. I love to run, especially with my family. We just did a half marathon together. Most of my spare time is spent with my husband going to the kids' cross country and track and field events, soccer games, band competitions, plays and musical performances, and getting them involved in community service. There is rarely a quiet moment in my life, but I would not have it any other way.

Do you have any advice for current GSBS doctoral students?

When I was involved in lab research, I absolutely loved it. However, for the students, there was a sense that the faculty would feel that you "sold out" or "didn't cut it" if you did something other than a traditional faculty research path. I want GSBS students to know that they should never feel that way. Funding is tight for research, but I encourage students with a passion for it to pursue it.

But bench research and the pursuit of grant funding are not for everybody. People get a PhD for many reasons. For me, the PhD is the most valuable thing I have ever done. You learn critical thinking. It prepares you to write policy, work on patents, write grants, and be an academic administrator. The PhD prepares you for anything. It's a huge accomplishment. Finish it and keep an open mind about what's next in your life and then use the degree to get there. ●