

DONNA PUCCIO

RETIRES AFTER 51 YEARS

A lot has changed at Divine Word College over the past 50 years. Despite the twists and turns that led the college to the missionary educational institution that it is today, one thing remained steady for the past five decades – the dedication of Donna Puccio.

This devoted employee has served as executive secretary to eight of the college's nine presidents. At the end of the 2021-2022 academic year, this beloved fixture of the DWC community stepped into yet another phase – retirement. Before leaving, she was asked to share her wisdom with the 2022 graduates as the principal speaker at the commencement exercises.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Donna was a married mother of two with secretarial experience when she saw an ad for a position at Divine Word College. She didn't get the job right away, but when it became available again shortly after, she accepted the position in October 1970. In the years that followed, she resigned three times to take leave as her family grew. "We didn't have maternity leave in those days, so I would quit work," Donna shared at graduation. "When I needed to return for financial reasons, I called (then Business Office Director) Bro. Leonard Bauer, SVD to see if there were any job openings. Except for once, the position of president's secretary remained open, as the then secretary was leaving."

Donna was at home with a new baby when her oldest child reached school age. She found herself feeling conflicted about whether to go back to the office. That's when Bro. Leonard adjusted Donna's schedule to ensure that she could be home when her daughter got on and off the school bus each day. Knowing that her employer respected her family life enough to make accommodations for her to succeed both as a mother and as a professional helped Donna find great fulfillment throughout her career.

"I think I was supposed to be in this position because it was always vacant whenever I came back," she said. Eventually, each of Donna's five children would be employed at Divine Word College for a period of time. Whether working the switchboards, cleaning the building or stuffing envelopes for the Development Office, the college was a family affair for the Puccios.

TECHNOLOGY

When Donna started at Divine Word College, she frequently transcribed letters dictated by then College President Fr. Harold Rigney, SVD. The mid 1980s brought



a huge shift in technology. “During my early years as a secretary, we had manual typewriters and did not see the invention of the electric typewriter until the 1970s. We would type letters using carbon paper or type documents on special paper that was then run on a lithograph machine to make copies,” Donna said. In the 1980s, the offices started using computers with word processing and later IBM arrived. Soon the college president was writing his own letters and Donna proofread them. By the 1990s, she was drafting meeting agendas and taking on more responsibilities as she gained the trust and respect of everyone, not just the college president. Donna knew the academic calendar backward and forward – partly because she compiled and printed it. She alerted presidents about upcoming events, reminded them about deadlines and gently nudged them when secondary reminders were needed. She also served as the recording secretary for the Board of Trustees, Board of Administration and other committees involving the president. She even served as secretary to the rector for about 15 years.

INTERCULTURALITY

In the 1970s, 16 Vietnamese seminarians who were refugees after the fall of Saigon were admitted to the college. Around that time, the decision was made to develop an extensive English as Second Language (ESL) program. “I have fond memories of the ESL program because one of those 16 seminarians was Fr. Joseph Tri Van Vu, SVD, who would study ESL and graduate from the College (undergraduate) program,” Donna said. “He went on to be ordained as a priest, and eventually returned to the College in the 1990s to serve for several years as Vice President for Formation and Dean of Students.”

WOMEN RELIGIOUS

Women of deep faith have always been a part of Divine Word College, and Donna was among them. Then in 2006, the number of women with spiritual devotion started increasing rapidly when DWC accepted the first four religious sisters for admission as students. Today, women account for approximately half of the students at the College. “The addition of the religious sisters brought about a more reverend or ‘holy’ atmosphere,” Donna said. “When the sisters walk by the chapel, they stop and make the sign of the cross. They have taught the male students to do the same! The sisters are so happy, joyous and appreciative and it spreads throughout the College - with students, faculty and staff.”

PRESIDENT’S RIGHT HAND

DWC President Fr. Tom Ascherman, SVD, first met Donna in 1972 when he was a freshman assigned to the library for work study. He recalls Donna being patient and kind then. “In 2017 when I returned as president, she was just as helpful, patient and kind,” he said. “Donna was the

Executive Secretary for eight of nine DWC presidents, and she helped introduce seven presidents to the role! She expertly helped me know what was next on my to-do list.” Former DWC President Fr. Michael Hutchins, SVD, once said a more appropriate title for Donna would be “President’s Reference Library.” She is an expert on DWC history with in-depth knowledge of everything from academics and employment issues to



Donna Puccio
Circa 1993

college policies and practices. “I’ve always believed that my job is to represent the president and the College the best that I can,” she said. “Though I’ve taken a great deal of personal satisfaction in achieving that goal, the thing that I have valued above all else has been the trust that I’ve built with each and every president for whom I have served.”

HONORS

Through the years, this humble worker has embodied the missionary spirit of the SVD with her hospitable, warm and inviting presence. In 2014, the Chicago Province of the Society of the Divine Word presented Donna with the Verbum Award, a prestigious honor given to a layperson who has made significant contributions to its work. In addition, DWC established the Donna Puccio Distinguished Service Award, which is given annually to a staff member for his or her outstanding service to the College community. After offering the commencement address in May, Donna was recognized in another way. The Divine Word College Board of Trustees presented her with an honorary doctorate of philosophy as a testimony to her extraordinary service to the College.

RETIREMENT

Donna was beginning to think about retirement when she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. This past year, she’s been focusing on her health and working primarily from home. In her retirement, Donna plans to spend time enjoying the beautiful family that she and her husband, Charlie, have built. With five children, 13 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, she will have plenty to keep her busy. Still, she’ll miss her family at DWC. “I think I’ll probably miss the people and being able to come to work every day,” she said. “I was content with what I was doing and it wasn’t about the money. It was about loving what I did.” Donna continues to serve DWC as a part-time volunteer, working on revisions to the policy handbook and assisting her successor, Chris Jackson, to take up her former tasks. In the closing of her commencement speech, Donna offered these words . . .

*“Divine Word College was never a job to me – it has always been an honor to serve all of you.”
The honor, we assure you Dr. Donna, was all ours.*