

EDNA BAEHRE

Linking Education



and Community

By Mikell Worley

When a United States Air Force officer extended his hand and said, “How do you do?” to Edna Baehre, she politely responded, “How do you do?” She was five years old and it was her first attempt at the English language. It was 1954, and she was living in Ludwigshafen, Germany, where her mom worked as an interpreter for a company that produced cleaning products.

Edna shares her mother’s talent with languages and minored in English while studying elementary education at a college in Germany. Her interest in the English language escalated even further when she met an American soldier at a German American Friendship Group at the university. They planned to marry and move to the United States, but her parents would not pay for her airfare. So, she worked at a sauerkraut factory to earn the money.

This was the first in a series of seemingly unrelated jobs that ultimately led to her current position as president of Harrisburg Area Community College, where she serves as the chief executive officer of the nearly 19,000-student, multi-campus institute that boasts an operating budget of \$130 million.

After coming to the United States, Edna and her husband lived in New York where she attended the University of Buffalo and there earned her doctorate in medieval literature and German language. Her chosen course of study was “totally applicable to everyday living,” she notes with a smile. “I can still remember driving through downtown Buffalo after the defense of my dissertation yelling ‘Yes!’ And the next day I started my new job as a clerk at Dresser Industries’ Parts Department in Olean, New York.” Edna takes herself lightly and humor is integral to her view of life.

She only worked at the company for three years but made significant, long-term contributions while there. “Everyone had a specialty,” she remembers. “I approached management and suggested that interns rotate positions for one month for each job so they could become specialists in a variety of areas. They loved the idea! And since so much of our business was with Germany I also suggested that we have Conversational German Training. And, of course, I became the trainer for the programs. Only much later did I realize that what I was promoting at Dresser Industries was workplace literacy which would become a major part of my work in my next job responsibilities.”

Her next career move, following the birth of her daughter in 1979, was writing curriculum for the Board of Cooperative Educational Services, a part of the secondary school system in New York State. “I worked with mechanics and engineers to identify and break down skills to a step by step process to facilitate teaching.” The grant for that



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job lasted for two years. After that, she moved on to a position as the Camp Fire Executive Director, overseeing coed, after-school programs and a 250 acre youth camp.

In the meantime, the dean of the branch campus of Jamestown Community College in Olean had been searching for an opportunity to bring her to the college and hired her in 1983 as the assistant dean of continuing education. She later became the dean of community education at Genesee Community College in Batavia, New York, and while there, due to the sudden resignation of the dean of students during the mid-fall semester, she was asked to combine that role with her full-time position for nearly a year. This was in addition to teaching two classes.

Then in 1989 the college's president, her mentor, encouraged Edna to attend the National Institute for Leadership Development in Phoenix, Arizona. While there Dr. Baehre set a goal to be a college president within ten years, largely due to the encouragement of the director of the institute. “Dr. Carolyn Desjardins was the most charismatic person I have ever met and she has had the most profound impact on my life,” says Dr. Baehre.

Next steps included a senior administrative position in Highland Community College, followed by another in Elgin Community College, both in Illinois. Then in 1997 she was interviewing at Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC).

“When I arrived at the hotel the night before the interview there was a newspaper with a front page article featuring all of the finalists,” remembers Edna. “The other four were men and college presidents. When I reviewed their credentials, I didn't think I had a chance. I decided to relax, have fun, and use the experience as practice for future interviews. I think that attitude helped me to get the job.”

Edna's love of learning, her creative approach to improving each work environment, and her ability to envision connections that will facilitate collaboration and more effective use of resources have enabled her to make sig-

nificant contributions to HACC as well as to the community. Since she was hired enrollment has nearly doubled. In addition to the Harrisburg location, there are HACC campuses in Gettysburg, Lancaster, Lebanon, and York, as well as a virtual campus online.

The role of college president comes with a myriad of responsibilities, not all of them pleasant. In May 2006, Hitender Thakur, a 23-year-old HACC student, was shot and killed while working as a convenience store clerk. Edna joined the Asian Indian Community and other concerned citizens at the HARI Temple



to offer comfort. Her comments were heartfelt as she tried to find words of strength and comfort for those in attendance.

Violence is on the rise across the country and the dropout rate is a national epidemic. Yet, as Edna points out, “approximately 35,000 people receive education and training in marketable skills through HACC annually. These graduates aren't on the street robbing and committing acts of violence. The impact on our community is staggering. Education is the great equalizer. It allows people to acquire marketable skills, develop pride in themselves, and contribute to the economy and the community.” Edna emphatically agrees with a statement attributed to Alan Greenspan, “The American community colleges are the Ellis island of higher education.”

The cost of education as opposed to incarceration is any easy equation. “We spend millions in after care,” she says. “It costs \$25,000 plus annually to house a person in prison. It costs about \$3,000 for a sponsored student, and \$5,000 for a non-sponsored student to attend a community college. The social and economic impact of having that kind of training and education available is invaluable.”

Dr. Edna Baehre received the 2007 Gandhi-King-Ikeda Award in recognition of her contributions to equal opportunity, diversity, and violence prevention. “I was humbled by this award,” remarks the educator. “My purpose in life is to serve, and to be recognized in this way for my service is a great honor.”

A strong spiritual foundation permeates her daily life. As a young person she studied comparative religions including Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. She continues to investigate different perspectives and finds value and similarities in the doctrines. Edna begins her day by reading the Bible. “I just let it fall open,” she says. “I also meditate on what I call my principles of CHIRT – Compassion, Humility, Integrity/Intuition, Reverence/Respect, and Trust. These principles guide me to make the best decisions as I go about my day.”

Edna Baehre radiates a quiet spirituality accompanied by a determination to make positive change. Our community and many others throughout South Central Pennsylvania are abundantly blessed for her dedication to education, her creative and innovative approach to expanding services, and her extraordinary leadership style. ❖

Mikell Worley is the founder and president of Mikell's Treasures. She has spent over 20 years designing and delivering self-improvement trainings, has had several cover stories in various magazines, and recently illustrated her first children's book. She is an advocate for women and children. She has two grown daughters.