

Susan Scrimshaw

BY MARY BETH GALARNEAU

When you think of a college president, you're not likely to conjure up the image of a motorcycle-riding, chorus-singing, community-oriented anthropologist with a sense of humor. But that improbable picture describes Susan Scrimshaw, Ph.D. in a nut shell.

Since moving to Troy last summer to take over as interim president of The Sage Colleges, Scrimshaw has embraced the area. In fact, extolling the Capital Region as a combination of "small-town intimacy [and] big-city sophistication," Scrimshaw had indulged in a wide array of local activities, from riding motorcycles with her husband in warmer months to joining the "Sage Singers", a singing group comprised of students, faculty and community members. At the other end of the spectrum, she has enjoyed many of the higher brow activities that the region has to offer. In fact, in her first three months here, she has attended more world-class musical events - the Philadelphia Orchestra at SPAC, Tanglewood in the Berkshires, The Troy Music Hall, Albany Symphony and Sage's own NYSTI - then she had in her previous two years in Boston.

But the main attraction for Scrimshaw is The Sage Colleges. Since leaving her previous position as president of Simmons College in Boston, she has dived head-first into her new job, bringing with her a momentum that even she admits was not here a year ago. Much of that momentum has to do with marketing, something the school didn't do much of in the past.

"They weren't telling the story," she said. "We have wonderful programs and began advertising in local papers, on billboards and in TV spots."

The campaign has paid off. Applications are up in the 40 percent range, compared to many other private colleges that are experiencing enrollment declines of up to 20 percent.

"There's a newfound energy and confidence now," marveled Dan Lundquist, vice president of Sage. "That's a pleasure to see - and be a part of - and there's something positively contagious about that," he continued, acknowledging that while Sage has always offered strong, relevant degree options, it was timid on the marketing side.

But marketing starts at home, and for Scrimshaw, that means involvement with her peers.

"I like to walk around and surprise people in their offices sometimes." As an administrator, she knows she can be consultative, but ultimately, she is the one who needs to make decisions. "We are all creating it [change] together, but there is no question that the president has to lead the way."

New blood

Part of Scrimshaw's leadership initiative revolves around her commitment to change. In her experience, she has found that it's important for an educational institution to have new blood, that "colleges need different styles at different times."

And she certainly has the experience. Prior to her



PHOTO BY SUSAN LARSON © SARATOGA PHOTOGRAPHY ASSOCIATES

job in Boston, she was the dean of the School of Public Health and professor of community health sciences and anthropology at the University of Illinois at Chicago for 12 years. She also served as the associate dean of public health and professor of public health and anthropology at UCLA in California. In addition, she also serves on many national boards.

Scrimshaw's emphasis in public health grew out of a long standing interest in public health - in her case, an interest that arose as a child growing up in Guatemala, where her father established a Nutrition Research Institute. At age 16, her family moved to Boston, where her father chaired the Department of Nutrition and Food Science at MIT.

She remembers the transition to a new culture and language as a "tough adjustment."

Just two years later, she enrolled at Barnard College in NYC, where she majored in Latin American Studies and Anthropology. She obtained her M.A. and Ph.D in Anthropology from Columbia University.

Her career has taken her to the west coast, the mid-west and back to the east coast. Now settled at Sage, she hopes to bring the importance of public health to the forefront.

"One of the things we want to model here is the college as part of a lifelong learning experience for health."

But Scrimshaw is also encouraging young people to develop behaviors that they can model for life. Since today's students can expect to have 10 jobs in their lifetime, they must have an education that's flexible and teaches them to think on their feet.

The Sage Colleges is comprehensive institution of higher education composed of three colleges: an undergraduate college for women in Troy; a co-educational undergraduate college in Albany's University Heights neighborhood; and a graduate school operating on both campus locations. Total enrollment is 3,300.

The Troy campus focuses on liberal arts, education, health care, and performing arts. Albany's campus has a contemporary focus on liberal arts, pre-professional studies, and studio arts.

"It's important to educate both halves of the brain," she said, explaining, "cross education." For example, an art major will also be taught to be an administrator and know how to do graphic design.

"It's not business as usual," she said. "I want Sage to be a 21st century small university."

While it's difficult for her to teach a class - "it's very hard for a president to show up at the same time every week," she said, she keeps active in the classroom by guest lecturing, calling it, "the best of both worlds."

A typical day for Scrimshaw is packed with meetings and phone calls. On this particular day, she was at the re-opening of the swimming pool on the Troy campus, then she was in a strategic planning meeting for four hours, followed by another meeting with the advancement team and two faculty members.

When she's not at work, she does a lot of "thinking and writing" at home in the evenings and on weekends. But this accomplished scholar has her vices just like everyone else. Recently, she wanted to catch an episode of "Grey's Anatomy", but knew she had a key letter she had to write, foregoing her weekly entertainment.

It helps her that she has a husband who encourages her "to get out of the house and do something physical," because her commitment to Sage appears, at times, to be unyielding, and that's great for the institution. Scrimshaw's commitment to the College is evident in the fact that, as we go to press, she is in talks with them about becoming the school's permanent president. "It's like a lease with the option to buy," she laughs.

Well, we're buying!

For more information visit www.sage.edu.