

The Wall of Mohawk College Presidents

By Lyla Miklos

The Satellite

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In the President's Board Room (Room C111C) one wall is lined with headshots of all the past Chairs of The Board of Governors (BOG). The opposite wall is lined with very large portraits of the Past Presidents of Mohawk College, including Mohawk's most recent Past President, Cal Haddad. Yet, there is one portrait missing – Catherine Rellinger's.

In November 1996, it was announced that Ms. Rellinger would become the fourth President of Mohawk College. President Rellinger officially started her new role on April 1, 1997 and was installed at a ceremony held in June 1997. There was a positive vibe bouncing off the walls of Mohawk College back then. Keith McIntyre's seventeen years as President with his particular style of management would be coming to an end. A reenergized relationship with the entire college community was hopefully about to begin.

From the start, Rellinger demonstrated she was a very different President from McIntyre. I remember during orientation week that year, back when I was a student, she donned a bathing suit and sat in a dunk tank while students and staff took turns throwing a ball into a bull's eye so she'd fall into the tank. Somehow I could never picture McIntyre allowing himself to be seen in such a vulnerable state.

In an interview with The Satellite (September 9, 1997) Past President Rellinger stated the following:

"I'm very mindful of the trust that is vested in the position [of President] and it is an extraordinary honour. For me, it's work about which I feel some passion. I want to not just technically fulfill the accountability of the job, but personally. I think leadership requires a willingness to give up some anonymity. You cannot sit on the fence. The position is challenging, both professionally and personally. I think the test is uncompromising integrity balanced with a real passion for the work in the sense of opportunity and the potential impact of decisions that are taken for the students and the business community." – Catherine Rellinger

A President who acknowledges that she is in a position of trust and must be accountable to those whom she serves - pretty impressive stuff. Rellinger's

previous background with Seneca College, The Children's Aid Society and The Worker's Compensation Board and many other organizations gave me the impression that she was going to be a leader with a wide berth of experience working with and for the public. A new day was dawning at Mohawk College and a new chapter in our college's history was about to begin.

And then something happened.

On September 15, 1997 a college wide voice mail message from then President Rellinger went out to everyone at Mohawk. Four top executives with the college had been dismissed without cause and in such a publicly humiliating way, most members of the college community felt like they had just been punched in the gut. While the college community collectively tried to catch it's breath, individuals also attempted to process and comprehend the implications of what had just transpired. The very next day President Rellinger along with then BOG Chair Olga Delvecchio announced Mohawk College's new strategic plan and corporate structure.

After this eventful week The Satellite (September 23, 1997) once again interviewed President Rellinger:

"I think I have done everything that I said I was going to do, and what this college said they wanted me to do. I've done it in a way that has been quite open, very direct, and has met any test the administration might want to apply to it . . . change is always really difficult, so there may be some uncertainty attached with that, and therefore directed at me. I don't exercise power in a way that would intimidate, I have no interest in that as it's not part of who I am, and I have shown that." – Catherine Rellinger

Reaction to this abrupt cleaning of house was, to put it mildly, mixed, but it appeared that a wait and see stance was the call from many College leaders.

Excerpt from the November 1997 issue of The Examiner [Mohawk College Faculty Association's (OPSEU Local 240) Newsletter]:

"I suggest it's too early to give up on Catherine Rellinger. She has a likeable self-deprecating manner, disproves of managerial perks and matrix management, plays the guitar, answers her own phone calls, seems to genuinely respect students, and enunciates attitudes and policies which are decent and forward-looking . . . the only responsible attitude to take is wait and see. To give up hope

at this point would only hasten the disaster we hope the college can avoid.” – Mike Walton

So wait and see Mohawk College did.

I left Mohawk College as a student in the Spring of 1998, but stayed on as a Director on its' Alumni Board after graduation for a two year term. I remember attending a BOG meeting with my Alumni Board hat on only to witness members of the college community openly question President Rellinger's honesty and integrity. The chill in the air was palpable.

Did the negative rumblings in the halls of Mohawk College as the new millennium began indicate that President Rellinger had alienated herself from almost anyone and everyone in the college? Were the gossip and whispers about her behaviour becoming unpredictable, erratic and downright paranoid valid? The final nail in Rellinger's coffin probably was a bizarre college-wide memo sent in April 2001 over the internal e-mail system, which was co-signed by Rellinger, three of her four Vice Presidents and the Director of Human Resources. It desperately attempted to quash the plethora of rumours circulating within and without the college community on her impending departure.

Only days after sending out this e-mail Rellinger left Mohawk College.

When I read, saw and heard all the dramatic media coverage back in April 2001, which revealed that both Rellinger and the BOG mutually agreed to end her current contract with Mohawk College a year early, I was sad. Saddened to see the new hope for my alma mater end up being what I could only consider one of the worst and most public black eyes to its reputation.

Yet despite all the fallout, disappointment and embarrassment of the Rellinger years I still strongly feel that the lack of a portrait of Catherine Rellinger in the President's Board Room is dishonourable and dishonest. To deny that Rellinger was a Past President of Mohawk College does a disservice to us all and distorts the history of the college. The fact of the matter, that cannot be ignored, is that Rellinger was the President of Mohawk College for four years, and was hired through a Board approved and managed selection process, not a coronation, to get the role of President. Portraits such as those that hang in the President's boardroom remind us of leadership times, both good and bad. In the bad times, they should serve to reinforce the coda “lest we forget” and repeat the same mistakes again.

Rellinger was just a person after all, who in retrospect was perhaps in a role she never should have been given. Was or is that really Rellinger's fault? Any President of this college is in the end a human being, with all the flaws, faults and foibles that come with being human. But they also have the potential, with the support of the Mohawk College community, to achieve great, wonderful and awe-inspiring things. I believe that the portraits and headshots in the President's Boardroom should be a complete and accurate reflection of the history of Mohawk College's governance and executive leadership. To do otherwise is an injustice to those involved and a distortion of the facts. I encourage the Board of Governors and the Mohawk College community to do some soul searching and find the strength and courage within themselves to right this wrong.



6. President
Mary Lynn
West-Moynes
(2003-present)



5. President
Cal Haddad
(2001-2003)



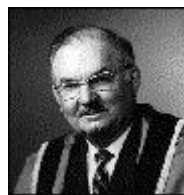
4. President
Catherine L.
Rellinger
(1997-2001)



3. President
Dr. Keith L.
McIntyre
(1981-1997)



2. President
Dr. Sam
Mitminger
(1971-1981)



1. President
John W. (Jack)
Hazelton
(1966-1971)

Lyla Miklos is an alumnus of Mohawk College.