

COVER **Story**

The College
Presidency —
Not for the
Faint of Heart

By LYNDA HUDZICK



Kim S. Phipps, president of Messiah College.

Messiah College President Kim S. Phipps always knew she wanted to be a teacher.

“My brothers joke that when I was 5 years old, I tried to force them to play school,” she said. And by the time she was in high school, she had decided on college teaching.

“Early in my teaching career, I became involved with campus committees and was elected to both the faculty senate and the tenure and promotion committee. These experiences taught me how much I love to collectively work with teams, problem solve, and create new programs, policies, and structures ...

“It’s not a surprise that I became a college president because of my interest in leadership and administration—but the presidency was not my goal when I came to Messiah College.”

Her professional journey to becoming a college president is considered fairly traditional, she explained.

“I became a full-time college professor at the age of 25 while completing a Ph.D. in rhetoric and communication,” Phipps said. “I started my academic career as a communication professor, became a department chair, and was promoted to associate dean, academic dean, provost, and finally president. What is less traditional about my path is for someone to serve as dean, provost, and president at the same institution.”

Describing herself as an extrovert, with strengths in relationship building and communication, Phipps admits that her favorite role as president is interacting with people.

“The presidency provides numerous opportunities for interacting with people from all walks of life,” she said. “For me, interacting with students is ... my ‘sweet spot.’ I actively look for opportunities to spend time with them.”

Throughout the academic year, Phipps visits every residence hall for “Pizza with the Prez,” where she enjoys informal conversations with the students.

“I also regularly host ‘Open Door Days’ when anyone on campus can meet privately with me, including students, faculty, staff,

and administration,” she said.

Additionally, she and her husband, D. Kelly Phipps, who she describes as “incredibly supportive,” host an average of about 4,000 visitors in their home each year—many of whom are students.

“Messiah College students give me great hope for the future,” she said. “You can’t interact with this wonderful generation of young adults, whose values are formed by their Christian faith and their sincere desire to make a significant difference, without becoming hopeful for the future.”

She and her husband also have a personal reason to be proud of this generation as they

please, turn over

share their lives with their own college student, 20-year-old daughter Brooke.

Phipps enjoys working with her colleagues as well—administration, faculty, and staff.

“They inspire me every day with their profound commitment to the college’s mission to produce servants, leaders, and reconcilers for the 21st century,” she said. “I have also been blessed by the opportunity the presidency has afforded me to learn to know alumni, parents, and benefactors.”

So what might a “typical” day be like for a college president? Phipps said that there is really no such thing as a typical day.

“Much of my time involves external activities such as speaking to alumni, visiting donors, meeting with parents, and discussing the college and, more broadly, private higher education with business and community leaders,” she explained. “Sometimes my days are filled with one-on-one meetings with my leadership team, meeting with student groups, or fundraising visits. I also have a significant involvement in our local community by serving on a number of boards.”

Within her own administration, Phipps has set a priority of building an outstanding leadership team.

“I intentionally seek to recruit people who are smarter and more knowledgeable than I am because I know that their presence makes me a better president and Messiah College a better institution,” she said. “The joke among my leadership team is that 95 percent of the time when you work with Kim, you get ‘hospitality Kim.’ Hospitality is a core value for me and I talk a lot about how we invite others into our lives in meaningful ways, by listening emphatically and withholding initial judgment.”

And what do you get the other 5 percent of the time? For this college

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president, born in New York City and having spent much of her childhood attending school on Long Island, her colleagues would say “that 5 percent of the time you get ‘Brooklyn Kim.’ Once I have listened to everyone and if we can’t achieve consensus, I will make the decision to move us forward,” she said.

Phipps is committed to volunteerism and community service, emphasizing that service has been a part of Messiah College’s history since it was founded more than 100 years ago.

“In fact, it is in our institutional DNA,” she said. “As a campus where we embrace Christian faith, we see service as an active,

outward manifestation of our own beliefs. I try to model service for this campus community by serving as president of the board of the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg ... I am also an active member of the board of Keystone Human Services and the Harrisburg Symphony. Giving back is a privilege and responsibility.”

Faced with the task of leading an academic community and the constant pressure to fundraise in a very challenging economic climate, Phipps said, “A college president must constantly make the case for the transformational purpose of a college education and must be responsible to queries and criticism in a social media context, which calls for immediate response. The presidency is not for the fainthearted.”

Yet she feels positive, and knows that in both her personal and professional lives, she has been committed to instilling a love of lifelong learning. She encourages the entire campus community to seek out opportunities to learn and grow and is excited about new programs at Messiah College that help do just that.

“We have been really pleased to recently develop graduate programs to provide education beyond baccalaureate degrees,” Phipps said. “Our graduate programs include master’s degrees in counseling, conducting, special-education/TESOL, higher education, art education, and youth and young adult ministries. We love having cohorts of students build on their current expertise or develop expertise in new areas.

“The majority of our graduate students currently are women, and so we are just really thrilled to be a part of developing community leaders for this region. There are many opportunities for continuing education and professional development in our region—the women of Central Pennsylvania have many options.”