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APRIL 2017

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Inspiring the Leaders of Tomorrow

By Starr Munro

April 3, 2017

“Good leadership, it’s not an easy thing to define, but you know it when you see it.”

When it comes to demonstrating the power of effective leadership, the Right Honourable Kim Campbell, Canada’s 19th and first and only female Prime Minister, sets the standard high. Ms. Campbell has dedicated her life to breaking



barriers, blazing the trail for women and leading for change. By speaking up and taking action on issues related to gender and power, international politics, democratization, and the environment, Ms. Campbell’s life is an inspiration to leaders of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Her political and professional history is filled with many firsts. At the age of 16, Ms. Campbell was the first female student council president at her high school. This was followed by becoming the first female Frosh President at UBC, the first female Justice Minister and Attorney General in Canada, the first female Minister of Defence of Canada and of any NATO country, the first female Minister of Veteran Affairs, the first female Leader of the PC Party, the first Prime Minister born in BC, the first Prime Minister to hold office in all three levels of



government and the first former Canadian PM to serve Canada as a diplomat after leaving office.

“When I was a little girl, I loved to organize people and get people doing things,” says Ms. Campbell. “When I was in Grade 5, I organized a group of girls to do the Charleston on Sports Day. When I was in Parliament, one of my colleagues said, ‘Oh, I think you are a born leader.’ I don’t know whether it was that I was born with particular skills of leadership or whether I always just felt a sense of responsibility. If there was some work that

needed doing, and nobody else seemed to want to do it, I would always say, ‘Well, I’ll do it.’ I would just step forward to make it happen.”

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At 70, when many people have started planning or settling into their retirement years, Ms. Campbell is still going strong and has once again stepped up to lead for change. Her most recent accomplishment is becoming the Founding Principal of the Peter Lougheed Leadership College (PLLC) at the University of Alberta. The College provides undergraduate students at U of A with experiential, interactive, interdisciplinary leadership skills training. Opened in 2015, the PLLC is unique in that it is already the largest leadership program for undergraduate students in the country.

“The creation of the College was a response to concerns expressed over recent years by the employer community that says students are getting excellent degrees at university. They are coming out very smart, but they don’t have the soft skills to deploy what they know, to deploy their knowledge,” says Ms. Campbell. “We wanted to create a unique program that was based on the notion that there was something one could add to a curriculum that would make students more effective and help them live more consequential lives.”



“It’s a very exciting program and it has been very interesting to create it,” says Ms. Campbell. “In my own life, I have had opportunities to create leadership roles in a variety of different ways. When I was out of office, I had been in and out of the Kennedy School at Harvard over the ’90s and, in 2001, I was invited to be part of an inaugural group of fellows at the new Centre for Public Leadership there. Then the Dean asked me if I would teach. I taught there for three years and I taught two courses. A course on Democratic Transitions and a course called Gender and Power. But I also got to work with a lot of people for whom leadership was their academic activity, and from several different perspectives. It opened up this whole field of leadership studies and leadership development in a very interesting way for me. Leadership is one of these big terms that means everything and nothing. In its ultimate sense, it’s the ability to mobilize people towards some kind of a goal or an end.”

Founding innovative programs for leaders is not an entirely new endeavour for Ms. Campbell. She has been involved, over the years, in creating two global organizations for leaders and participated in many others. Ms. Campbell is very proud of her contributions towards the Council of Women World Leaders, an organization of current and former female heads of state and government; and the Club of Madrid. Ms. Campbell is a founding member of the Club of Madrid and has served as Acting President, Vice President, Secretary General, and as a Board

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Member. The Club of Madrid is the largest forum of former democratic Presidents and Prime Ministers.

“I joke that having been Prime Minister is like having gum on your shoe. You never quite get rid of it,” laughs Ms. Campbell. “The status of having been Prime Minister is a piece of political capital and I try to deploy it for good – to open doors and to continue to allow me to support democratization and the advancement of women around the world.”

It’s this sense of responsibility to make a difference in the world and her ability to empathize with others that has been the driving force in Ms. Campbell’s life.

“I was born after World War II in 1947. It was such a powerful event in world history, the most important event of the 20th century, and so many different issues arose from it,” she says. “How do you keep that terrible war from happening again? How do you keep the peace and what are the threats to peace? These were all things that were important to me growing up. Both of my parents were in uniform in the war. I felt a connection to it and I had this sense of responsibility. I think that, as much as anything, was the thing that motivated me to take action and follow the path I have. The sense that I wanted to be involved in things beyond my own personal life. To look more broadly at my society and the world – that sense of responsibility for the state of the world. Not that I alone had it, but I felt I had an obligation to try to make a contribution, to be part of making the world better.”

A naturally outgoing child, Ms. Campbell’s parents supported her ambitions at a very young age and never let gender become a defining factor in her dreams or pursuits.

“My sister and I were both encouraged when we were young. My mother was quite wonderful. Anything we were interested in we were encouraged to do, and she would teach us how to do it. She never said, ‘No, you’re too young.’ She would always find some age-appropriate way to teach us. She always encouraged us,” remembers Ms. Campbell.

“When I was kid I knew how to cook. I knew how to do things that made me self-reliant. Things like how to hammer nails, all these kinds of things. It gave me a confidence that I could do things. A lot of girls have that and a lot of girls lose that when they reach puberty. I don’t think I ever lost my belief that girls were smart and could do stuff. I was never afraid to try something. I taught myself to do a lot of things because I wanted to do them, and that gave me a confidence and an optimism that was very helpful.”

Having confidence to try new things and the grit to endure the challenges that come with being a trail blazer have been vital to Ms. Campbell’s success as a leader. It hasn’t always been easy. Losing the federal election in 1993 and her short term as Prime Minister was a difficult pill to swallow. But it was also one of those moments that define real leaders and separate the weak of heart from the truly strong. Rather than break her spirit and faith in democracy, Ms. Campbell took her experience and found new and innovative ways to use it for good — teaching, consulting, speaking up, engaging and mobilizing the leaders of tomorrow.

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“I think what has worked for me is the ability to make my way. I suppose survival is my greatest achievement,” says Ms. Campbell. “If you are a non-prototypical leader and people aren’t sure you really belong there, they assume you are just a flash in the pan. They don’t expect you to rise to the occasion and to continue on when you have a setback. When one door closed, I looked for other doors to open that would enable me to do the things that were important to me. I loved politics and I would have been very happy to continue with a political life, but that option wasn’t there.”

“Happiness is being able to earn your living doing something you like doing. And that is one of the greatest things that can happen in your life,” says Ms. Campbell. “Incidentally, it doesn’t mean doing something that is incredibly creative, it can also mean doing something where you enjoy the people and get satisfaction from the work, but where it also makes it possible for you to pursue other things you like to do, that you don’t earn a living doing. Being able to enjoy what you do for a living is a great and wonderful thing and many people don’t have that opportunity.”

“I enjoy being at the University. It’s fun working with young people and I have great colleagues. I was with a group of our teaching fellows today and it’s very inspiring to see young people benefiting from something that you’ve created, but also contributing to it in a wonderful way, even better than you could have ever expected. It’s the people who make you look good by taking your ideas and running with them in a very imaginative and successful way.”

Ms. Campbell expects she will stay at the University of Alberta until the PLLC is successful and sustainable. She currently spends three quarters of her time working for the University, living in Edmonton and working on campus two weeks a month. She spends the rest of her time working from her primary residence in Vancouver, or in one of her other homes in New York or France, or on the road travelling to various speaking engagements.

“The University bought 75 per cent of my time because I told them I couldn’t give them 100 per cent since my husband would divorce me,” quips Ms. Campbell. “This gives me the opportunity to go home and spend time with him [Hershey Felder, Canadian pianist, actor, playwright, composer, producer and director] because when he’s performing he’s often doing eight shows a week in some cities. So, I try to spend time with him as much as possible.”

“I am not slowing down, not yet. Although, I feel like I am actually kind of ready now to slow down a little. I will probably be here another year. I wanted to create the College and make it sustainable, so that I could then hand it off to somebody. That is the goal – to create something that can then survive on its own merit,” says Ms. Campbell. “I am a creator, not a sustainer. The excitement for me is in creating the new thing and putting it together and making it work, and getting it to stand on its own two feet, and then to go off and do something else.”

And what’s next?

“I would like to spend a lot more time with my husband. He’s been long suffering for a number of years,” chuckles Ms. Campbell. “I realize I’ve been travelling around so much that a lot of my traditional leisure activities have gone by the wayside. That’s another reason why I would like

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to slow down and maybe not travel around so much — to have more time to make music [she plays the cello, piano, guitar and sings] and do those kinds of things I enjoy: reading, spending time with my dog, seeing my family and making time for friends.”

“I will always keep my speaking engagements up because I do like to communicate. My husband thinks we can afford for me to retire, but I’ve always earned a living,” says Ms. Campbell. “I’ve always tried to find ways to do constructive and interesting things. A lot of things I have done I would never have put on a bucket list because I never would have thought of them myself. Sometimes you need to have somebody else’s imagination to help you find projects. There are lots of things I am sure I would like to do and I will probably do some of them. But what comes next and what those things are I am not exactly certain.”

Snapshot with Kim Campbell

If you were to meet your 20-year-old self, what advice would you give her?

“I am not sure that I would necessarily want to spare myself any of the ups and downs of my life. I don’t think I would want to wish myself a non-troubled or non-tested life. But I might say work on other languages.”

Who or what has influenced you the most and why?

“I’ve had many influences in my life, but I think learning or understanding the difference between democracies and non-democracies has really influenced me, in terms of making it very clear to me what the stakes are when we don’t preserve democracy. I spent three months in the Soviet Union in 1972, and I came to understand what tyranny meant and what a lack of democracy means for people’s lives. Also growing up as a post-war Baby Boomer – my parents were in uniform, the discussion of World War II all around, reading books on the Holocaust – I became very aware of the perils that could exist out there. Another thing, too, was being raised to believe girls could do anything, but that it wasn’t the universally accepted proposition.”

What does courage mean to you?

“Courage is the ability to overcome fear. I’ve done lots of things in my life and people have said, ‘You’ve been so brave.’ And I’ve thought, ‘Well, I wasn’t afraid of doing it.’ So, to me it didn’t mean being brave. But there are things in my life that I have feared and I feel more courageous having confronted those fears and done those things. Sometimes, it means standing up for what you believe, other times, it’s what you say, or what you allow to pass around you. Sometimes, it’s physical courage. Whether it’s throwing yourself down a ski slope or going to war. Courage is the strength to overcome fear and do what you think is right.”

What does success mean to you?

“Success means achieving a goal, but in such a way that there is always another goal to work towards. I don’t think of success as a final destination. Accomplishing a goal, whatever it is, is a wonderful thing. Success in life means having had the opportunity to do things that have given you that pleasure and to have the health and where-with-all to continue to pursue goals.”