

## CURRICULUM VITAE People in education

# Donna Breaks the Mold

BY RENEE GEARHART LEVY

**T**HEY TELL A story at the University of Wisconsin-Madison about the first time Chancellor-elect Donna E. Shalala paid the school a visit after her appointment last May.

It seems Shalala had finished meeting with the University's Board of Regents, state senators, and other legislators, and was touring the campus—introducing herself to faculty members, staff members, and students whom she encountered along the way—when she came upon a university maintenance man.

"Hi," Shalala said. "I'm the new Chancellor."

"Oh," replied the man. "I heard they hired a girl."

"He must have thought I was loony-tunes," she laughs.

At five feet even, vibrant Shalala (pronounced *Shal-lay-la*), now serving out her term as president of New York City's Hunter College, doesn't typify the staid, greying image of a college president. A woman who refuses to conform to stereotypical expectations, she is probably unlike any college president you have ever known.

**S**HALALA, AMAZING to everyone who knows her, has accomplished more in her 46 years than most people could conceive of in three lifetimes. She has a virtually boundless reservoir of

energy—the result, a staggering list of career and personal achievements.

"Donna has a rare mix of talent," explains one of her early mentors, Alan "Scotty" Campbell, former dean of SU's Maxwell School of Public Affairs and Citizenship and former chairman of the U.S. Civil Service Commission. "In addition to her being very bright, she has fantastically high levels of energy, an uncanny ability of getting along with people and maintaining contact with them, and an unusual professional commitment."

Shalala spent four years as assistant to Campbell at SU, while earning master's and doctoral degrees

(in 1970). From there, she progressed through a series of academic appointments—assistant professor of political science at Bernard M. Baruch College, Spencer fellow, Guggenheim fellow, visiting professor at Yale Law School, and chairman of the program in politics and education at Columbia University's Teachers College—before moving into government.

Shalala developed her political savvy in top arenas. She was the only female member of the Municipal Assistance Corp. during New York City's fiscal crisis, and in 1977 she was appointed assistant secretary for policy development and

research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under President Jimmy Carter.

When Carter lost reelection and his administration left Washington, Shalala took on the presidency of Hunter College, becoming, at age 39, the youngest person ever to hold the post. She breaks another barrier when she takes the helm of Wisconsin-Madison on January 1; she'll be the first female president of a Big Ten university.

Shalala plays as hard as she works. The commitment and conviction that characterize her professional life can be found in nearly everything she does. She is a crack tennis player (she won the Ohio state championship as a teen) and a whiz at Middle Eastern cooking. And she climbs mountains—the Rockies, the Andes, and the Himalayas, twice.

As with many top-level executives, Shalala is also dedicated to countless boards and organizations, most of them working to improve the quality of life for less privileged segments of society.

**T**OTHER EXPLOITS she brings not only vigor but human compassion. Shalala is a product of the 1960s whose youthful idealism has never faded. Her concern for humanity is genuine, evident throughout the spectrum of her life's work.

"I've spent most of my career," she says, "trying to get three things done: pursuing excellence, making sure that more people had opportunity, and helping poor kids. I have an ambitious agenda for the world."



Donna Shalala, chancellor-elect of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, brings to college administration a flair ordinarily reserved for other professions.

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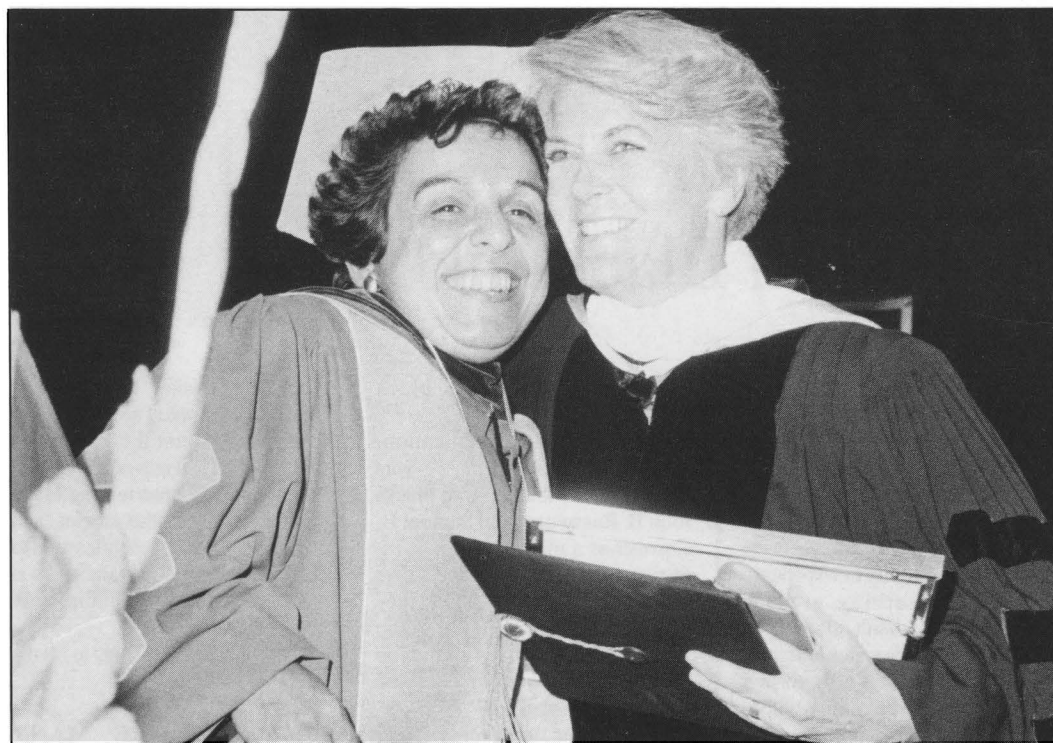
Following her graduation from Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, Shalala spent two years with the Peace Corps, teaching English in a rural farming village in southern Iran. "It was the thing that bright young liberal arts majors who wanted to save the world did," she has said. "I loved what I was doing."

That love for helping has endured. At HUD, where she supervised 400 employees and oversaw a \$120-million budget, Shalala headed projects that included the funding of battered women's shelters, a study of the housing needs of low-income families, and the development of tougher building codes. More than half of the professional staff hired during her tenure were women.

Yet Shalala's greatest legacy of human commitment may be in what she's done for Hunter College. The largest college within the City University of New York, weighted heavily with low-income minority students, Hunter suffered from decaying facilities, lagging enrollment, and a demoralized staff when Shalala arrived. During her seven years in office, she has been credited with humanizing the institution and transforming the college's reputation. Hunter is, by her own account, "the hottest place in New York [City] to be right now."

Upon her appointment as Hunter president, Shalala personally called each department head and program director to learn about the different areas of the institution and solicit ideas for needed change. She has doubled the institution's physical space, quadrupled research endowments, stabilized enrollment, instituted graduate programs, and doubled the numbers of female and minority faculty members to reflect the 60 percent minority student population of the school.

Shalala claims to know a thousand Hunter students by name or major and at least half of the school's 700 faculty members. She has developed a summer job program for minority students that has become a national model and started a day care center on campus for Harlem children. She once surprised a group of students studying for finals at the campus's only dormitory by showing up at midnight to cook them breakfast.



Shalala and friend Geraldine Ferraro at Hunter's 1985 commencement.

**T**HE SOURCE OF HER incredible blend of commitment, chutzpah, and outright caring may be her own lower-middle-class ethnic upbringing.

The granddaughter of Lebanese Catholic immigrants, Shalala grew up with her twin sister, Diane, in a Lebanese-Syrian community in Cleveland. Their father, who died 16 years ago, sold real estate and was a civic activist. "He was a real leader," Shalala says.

Her mother, a teacher, began law school at night—juggling two day jobs—when the girls were in third grade. She is still a practicing attorney. Mrs. Shalala was also a nationally ranked amateur tennis player.

When she was 11, Shalala played Pigtail League softball, coached by an energetic summer recreation leader named George Steinbrenner, who now owns the New York Yankees.

"All we needed to do, he said, was to 'learn to throw overhand and slide' and we'd be champs," Shalala has said. "We did and we were. But even if we hadn't won, the lesson paid off. If we acquired the appropriate skills, we could play hardball with anyone. It was my first feminist experience."

As a girl, Shalala—who lists

feminists Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, and Geraldine Ferraro among friends—dreamed of emulating women such as Amelia Earhart, Jane Addams, and Eleanor Roosevelt. "None of my heroes were college presidents," she has said. "I never even met a Ph.D. until I went to college."

Ironically, not only is she "a Ph.D.," Shalala has received 11 honorary degrees in as many years, including an honorary doctor of laws degree from Syracuse in June. A patchwork quilt made from her silk and velvet academic hoods adorns her dining room wall.

**W**HEN SHALALA assumes the chancellorship of Wisconsin-Madison, adding yet another hood to her collection, she will lead the nation's fourth largest university—boasting 43,000 students—and the third largest research institution in the country. She will become the boss of more than 15,000 employees and annual budget of \$795 million.

Shalala says she will use the same hands-on approach at Madison that's worked elsewhere, though, she admits, "It will take longer because it's a much larger institution."

The university is counting on her. "There is great anticipation of the

good she's going to be able to do here," says Katherine Lyall, executive vice president of the 26-campus University of Wisconsin system (and an associate professor at SU from 1969 through 1971). "I think . . . she will be very interested in having close ties with students and will pay more attention to the problems of academic staff than has been paid in the past. Obviously, she's going to be very anxious to improve the status of women and minority faculty members."

By her own admission, Shalala has averaged two job offers a month from headhunters for the last several years, but chose the Wisconsin post because "it seemed like the right place at the right time," she says. "Wisconsin is a university that has always stood for something. It has a progressive tradition, very much like my alma mater, Syracuse."

An avowed sports fan, Shalala admits (with typical candor) that she was attracted to Wisconsin by Big Ten athletics also. In fact, she scheduled her second campus visit to coincide with the Wisconsin-Hawaii football game.

"I kept saying I didn't want to be anywhere where there wasn't a Division-I football team," she has said. "Well, I've got my football team."