

Nurturing Success

Nancy Cantor embraces her role as Syracuse University's 11th Chancellor with boundless energy, clear vision, and a sense of discovery

By Margaret Costello

Nancy Cantor grew up in New York City during the socially turbulent '60s, dreaming of becoming a ballet dancer. After returning home from dance lessons, she joined family dinner discussions about the continuous stream of major news events spawned by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. It was in this context that she began to embrace the values of diversity and change. "Social causes were very important in my family, and growing up during the height of the civil rights and women's movements, I was constantly exposed to the issues of citizenship and public engagement," says Cantor, who will begin her tenure as Syracuse University's 11th Chancellor and President in August. "I was actively involved in social causes and did a lot of exploration of New York City's many neighborhoods, ethnicities, and cultures."

Two pivotal experiences as a teenager helped shape her work as a social psychologist: She volunteered with the Encampment for Citizenship program in a rural coal-mining town in West Virginia, and she participated in an international exchange program, living for several months in a small fishing village near Bergen, Norway. "These were really eye-opening experiences and got me thinking about how to cross boundaries between different kinds of people," she says. "You become much more observant about yourself and the world by fumbling around in another person's culture. While initially that can be nerve-wracking, you also learn how rewarding it can be to bridge those gaps."

Throughout these early experiences, Cantor nurtured her passion for dance and the arts. One reason she chose to attend Sarah Lawrence

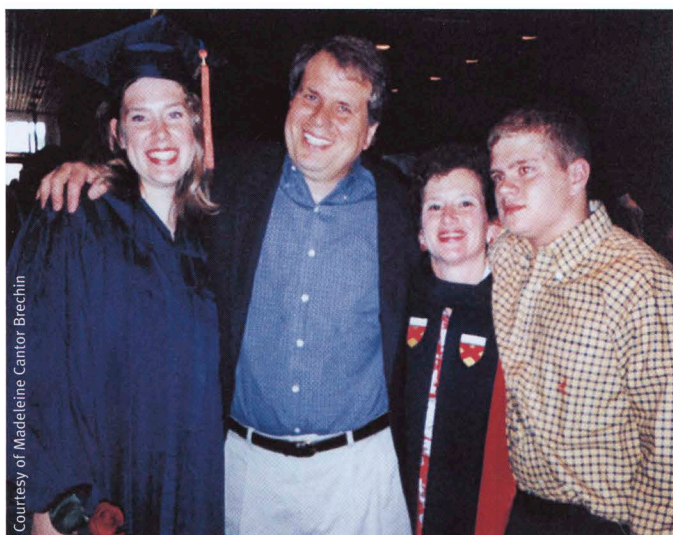
College, a small liberal arts institution in Westchester County, New York, was because of its dance program and its commitment to the arts. "It was a very experimental, artistic, and creative place," she says. "It was a perfect school for me because I really developed my interest in interdisciplinary work and creativity—in all its forms." Because the school required no specific academic majors, she studied everything from anthropology and literature to visual art and psychology. Through this framework, she learned that the creative process could be applied to everything, even an intensive independent study she took in mathematical number theory.

After graduating from Sarah Lawrence in 1974, she enrolled in the doctoral program in experimental mathematical psychology at Stanford University, knowing she wanted to become a profes-



CHANCELLORS OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

1. Alexander Winchell, 1873-74
2. Erastus Otis Haven, 1874-80
3. Charles N. Sims, 1881-93
4. James Roscoe Day, 1894-1922
5. Charles Wesley Flint, 1922-36
6. William Pratt Graham, 1937-42
7. William P. Tolley, 1942-69
8. John E. Corbally, 1969-71
9. Melvin A. Eggers, 1971-91
10. Kenneth A. Shaw, 1991-2004
11. Nancy Cantor, 2004-



Madeleine Cantor Brechin, left, celebrates high school graduation with her parents and brother Archie.

sor. Throughout her studies, she moved between several research areas, including cognitive psychology and math modeling. She eventually settled on social psychology, a hybrid field that examines individuals in a group environment. Today, she says she continues to draw on her education daily, using an interdisciplinary approach to problems and examining how individuals develop identity through full participation in social groups and connections to others. “It’s so important for a university to think about questions of society and individuals, how to prepare future leaders who can defuse conflicts, and how to make people feel comfortable enough to take risks, try new things, and change,” she says.

Broadening Perspectives

Cantor believes strongly in people’s ability to change and grow. She has focused much of her scholarly work on how

individuals can alter their self-perceptions by taking advantage of new opportunities and stretching their comfort zones. She incorporated those theories into her work as chair of the psychology department at Princeton University; dean of the graduate school and then provost and executive vice president at the University of Michigan; and chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “Interdisciplinary work and diversity on a campus are valuable because they change people’s perceptions of themselves and the world,” says Cantor, who was named Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Women’s Studies at SU. “Theoretically, we all operate rather automatically from a whole set of default ways of seeing the world based on our habits, upbringing, and culture. A physicist and an artist think about the physical nature of the world in different ways. But you get them together, and each starts thinking differently on how to view a problem while trying to describe it to the other person.”

Keeping her mind open to people who may differ from her has had a profound impact on Cantor’s life, personally and professionally. As a tenured faculty member at Princeton University on a yearlong sabbatical at the University of Michigan, Cantor ventured outside her newly formed social circle in Ann Arbor one night to go on a blind date with a graduate student in environmental sociology. The student, Steven Brechin, was a Protestant from the Midwest who came from a working-class family. Cantor, a Jewish New Yorker, grew up in a household of intellectuals—her mother, Marjorie, an expert on aging, and her father, Aaron, a lawyer. “Even though we came from different worlds, we had similar values and views on life,” says Brechin, now her husband of 22 years. “We talked about this and how it ties in to Nancy’s interest in diversity. Sometimes it’s great to interact with people you wouldn’t normally think of as being part of your social world.” Of course, in their case, he adds that Cantor’s interest in football and other sports helped strengthen their bond. “She had this strange combination of being a warm person, a well-

Career Highlights

Education

- B.A., Sarah Lawrence College, 1974; Ph.D., Stanford University, 1978

Positions

- Princeton University: Psychology professor, 1978-83 and 1991-96 (department chair, 1992-96)
- University of Michigan: Psychology professor, 1983-91 and 1996-2001; associate dean for faculty programs, Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies, 1989-91; graduate school dean and vice provost for academic affairs, 1996-97; provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, 1997-2001
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Chancellor and psychology professor, 2001-04

Awards

- Distinguished Scientific Award for an Early Career Contribution to Psychology from the American Psychological Association
- Woman of Achievement Award from the Anti-Defamation League

Professional affiliations

- Executive committee member of the Association of American Universities
- Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- Member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences
- Past chair and member of the board of directors of the American Association for Higher Education
- Board member of the American Council on Education
- Board of trustees member of Sarah Lawrence College
- Board member of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences
- Board member of the American Institutes for Research

Other experiences

Served as a member of the national advisory board of the National Survey of Student Engagement and on various advisory boards and study sections of the National Science Foundation and the National Research Council, and the Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender Related Issues

established academic at an early age, and an avid sports fan,” he says. “What could I do? I had to marry her.”

In a less literal sense, Cantor has been instrumental in arranging marriages between diverse departments at academic institutions. At the University of Illinois, she created 11 cross-campus initiatives that pull together faculty from a variety of disciplines to study such issues as family resilience, art and technology, globalization, aging, and food security. “Even at a time of budget cuts, she pushed for excellence from our faculty and students by investigating issues that required expertise from across the spectrum,” says Jo Thomas, assistant chancellor for public affairs at Urbana-Champaign, who is moving to Syracuse University to continue her work with Cantor. “We’ve gotten a number of grants from corporations and foundations to support this research in a large part due to Nancy’s enthusiasm and vision. She’s excited about Syracuse’s support of interdisciplinary projects.” Cantor also established several cultural centers at Illinois to help groups better appreciate and share their cul-

ture. Cantor drew the backing and respect of campus members, says Abigail J. Stewart, professor of psychology and women’s studies at the university. “Most of the campus was extremely proud of Nancy’s clarity of vision and capacity to articulate the reasons that affirmative action is the right policy for UM admissions,” Stewart says. “She was an inspiring example of someone who thought the issues through, knew what she thought was right, and pursued that view in an unconflicted way.”

As chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Cantor listened to the complaints of some campus members who believed the Fighting Illini’s mascot, Chief Illiniwek, disparaged American Indians. She took more than two years to consider the pros and cons surrounding the issue before ultimately issuing a statement calling for a new mascot. Her comments drew fire from some townspeople and campus members, and she became the target of a smear campaign. “Sometimes academic leaders have to take controversial stands to remain authentic with their own belief systems and their own perceptions of what is important for the institution,” Cantor says. “I believe the mascot was divisive and I needed to express that.”

Compassionate Leadership

Cantor’s strengths as a decisive and tenacious leader may be surpassed only by her compassion for those she leads. Upon learning of a University of Michigan student’s death, Cantor, as provost, immediately met with the student’s family. “Nancy felt, in a very personal way, the loss of any member of the campus community,” Stewart says. “She automatically sought to be present in those painful, powerful, and very personal moments. She is openly concerned and caring about people—faculty, students, staff, alumni, everyone—as individuals, and she communicates that concern and caring directly.”

Cantor expresses her concern for employees through her actions as well as her words. At the University of Illinois, she was instrumental in initiating new child care and family planning programs. “It improves the atmosphere of an institution to be aware that employees are balancing their work with other responsibilities,” says Cantor, who is the mother of Madeleine, 19, and Archie, 14. “The more we, as an institution, can be realistic about and supportive of that, the better. My family is very important to me and engaged in what I do.”

For the Cantor Brechin family, work and family life often overlap. Madeleine Cantor Brechin, a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says she appreciates the experiences she and her brother were afforded by growing up on college campuses, though sometimes the spillover from her mother’s work wasn’t always a positive part of family life. For example, the controversy over Chief Illiniwek led townspeople to put ads on billboards across town that read: “Keep the chief, retire Cantor.” “Mom is always careful about wanting us to hear about a potential problem from her first,” Madeleine Brechin says. “People can say some really awful things, and sometimes I want to protect her from that. It’s hard to see her whole life get played out and twisted around in the newspaper. But she is such a strong woman, and she does a great job of separating work from home.”



After being introduced at a press conference, Nancy Cantor listens to a student as David Smith '66, vice president for enrollment management, looks on.

tural understanding with others. “Nancy has said that diversity is not an afterthought,” Thomas says. “You can’t just tack it on. It has to be a cornerstone of what you’re doing.”

Principled Approach

Cantor’s commitment to seeking diversity and incorporating multiple perspectives has sometimes thrust her into controversies. As provost of the University of Michigan, she defended the school’s admissions policy against a lawsuit that sought to eliminate the consideration of race in admissions. “Encountering differences, rather than one’s mirror image, is an essential part of a good education,” Cantor and Michigan president Lee Bollinger co-wrote in a 1998 op-ed article in *The Washington Post*. “Race is educationally important for all students, because understanding race in America is a powerful metaphor for crossing sensibilities of all kinds.”

Her unwavering support of affirmative action at Michigan

Cantor grew up in a two-income household at a time when many mothers stayed home. This reinforced her notion that she, too, would balance work and family. “I never really thought that I wouldn’t do both,” she says, adding with a laugh: “There have been many times I thought I *couldn’t* do both, but I never thought I wouldn’t.” She believes strongly that each aspect of her life enriches the others and that her children benefit from seeing their mother always doing her best. “It teaches them resilience,” she says. It has also instilled in the children a deep respect for their mother. “I am extremely proud of my mom for breaking gender boundaries as the first woman to take some of the positions she has held,” says her son, Archie Brechin. “My mom is a wonderful person. She is hardworking, efficient, and someone who strives to make this world a better place.”

New Energy

Those who know Cantor say the Syracuse community can

expect a leader who will bring endless enthusiasm and vivacity to her work, as well as the strength and presence of a person three times her 5-foot frame. “She is remarkable for her absolute unwavering tenacity once she has taken a position or made a commitment,” Stewart says. “It is rare to work with someone who is so utterly and deeply reliable. When she says she will back something, she simply lives up to that.” Jo Thomas predicts Cantor’s refreshing mix of realism and optimism will spread across campus. “She makes time for anyone, and she’s always interested in what other people have to say,” Thomas says. “The only way she’s able to do that—and run a huge institution—is to work all the time. But she enjoys it and she’s fun. She really cares about people.”

Thomas says Cantor’s only weakness might be pushing herself too hard. Cantor’s husband agrees. “She would work 24/7; no one works harder than Nancy,” says Brechin, a sociologist who has been appointed to the faculties of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Maxwell School, and the State Uni-

Q & A with the Chancellor-Elect

Q: What will be your top priorities when you take over as Chancellor in August?

A: The most important thing for me will be to bring to life what I’ve read on paper. I want to get a sense of the different areas of campus—the four areas of interdisciplinary SPIRES [Strategic Partnerships for Excellence In Research and Educational Success], the arts, public engagement, recruitment of students, and the intellectual life of the institution. I’ll have a lot of listening and learning to do, but I’ll try to galvanize activity in particular areas.

Q: Diversity is a core value at SU, and you have said, a necessary value in a multiracial democracy. How do you plan to support diversity here?

A: It is critical to articulate the different ways in which diversity and excellence intersect, and the way in which the institution’s core missions are intertwined with being productive in a diverse democracy. We need to interweave the problems of a diverse democracy into the curriculum, and infuse our scholarship, and certainly our public engagements, with these issues. We want to emphasize commitments to intellectual and social diversity as commitments to creativity, brainstorming, and bringing different perspectives to bear. Our commitment to diversity is one in the same as our commitment to excellence.

Q: How do you feel about becoming the first female Chancellor in SU history?

A: It’s great. It shows that SU has a commitment to bringing all kinds of talent to the table. To the extent that I can serve as a role model for that message, I think it’s really important. I also think that everybody pursues a leadership role from a particular life’s experience and that allows me to be attuned to issues that I have grown up with as a woman. For example, how do you create a voice for everyone in the institution? How

do you pay attention to the stresses and strains of modern work and family, or work and the fuller life of public engagement? How do you think about bringing groups together? That doesn’t mean if you didn’t grow up as a woman, you wouldn’t have those interests. But they are certainly associated with viewing the world through gender.

Q: How would you describe the relationship between the University and the community?

A: There has to be an extremely close and reciprocal relationship between the University and the community. In order for the University to really do its job of educating future leaders, of understanding the workings of our society, and of contributing new knowledge that changes people’s worlds, it has to be completely open to the influences and issues of the community, and vice versa. The University can, in partnership with the community, create new worlds beyond the campus.

Q: As Chancellor, what can you do to help improve the economy of Central New York?

A: What one wants to do first and foremost is create as many reciprocal partnerships as possible in areas where SU has particular expertise and where there are opportunities for economic development and improvements to the community’s well-being. A university can also be a magnet for a creative culture, which in turn attracts new generations of people with innovative ideas. All of those things create momentum for a community that redounds positively for the economic development of Central New York. Then you’ll really see people being energized by the life of innovation.

Q: What role do the cultural arts have in enhancing campus and community life?

A: The arts are a natural connection between the campus and the community. Everybody can do the arts and appreciate

versity of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. "She is an inspirational, dynamic leader and her energy level will amaze everybody." Brechin says he is responsible for ensuring his wife makes time for rest and relaxation, and the family has already started exploring Central New York's outdoor recreational areas.

Seeing people envision new futures for themselves and succeed is one of Cantor's greatest pleasures. She enjoys witnessing the transformation of students, the excitement of the faculty's scholarly achievements, and the accomplishments that result from campus and community collaborations. "The great

thing about a university is that you're both changing the individual lives of students and faculty members, and you're changing the world via discoveries," Cantor says. "You're charting a course for who's going to lead the world and you're actually and substantively creating things that do change everyday life." Instead of perceiving herself only as an administrator responsible for budgets and bottom lines, Cantor sees her primary role as Chancellor as an agent of change. "Leading a university is about exploring the life of the mind," she says. "It's about development, discovery, innovation, and changing lives."



them. They are intergenerational. The arts attract people to a community, and are a big part of the health and vitality of a community. The creative process itself is a signature for a liberal education, and the arts are so helpful for both artists and non-artists as a medium of exchange. The arts are democratic, and we want to invite everyone into the life of the mind.

Q: The University's Academic Plan promotes interdisciplinary research on campus. Why is collaborative research so important?

A: Collaborative, interdisciplinary research is really important because it brings to the table diverse perspectives to address critical issues and areas that are ripe for intellectual discovery and social change. The collaborative part is crucial because these are complex areas and bringing different perspectives to bear on them results in creativity. People view the problems through their own disciplinary lenses and then try to translate what they see to each other. You have to get outside of your own language and view the problems from someone else's perspective. That, of course, is at the base of what it means to exist in a diverse community, but it's hard, both from a scholarly and an interpersonal point of view.

Q: How do you determine what resources to invest in individual academic programs?

A: When I think about future investment at an educational institution, I think about three key missions: to capitalize on

its strength to make intellectual discovery, to address critical societal issues, and to educate the next generation of leaders and citizens. I try to look for investments that intertwine all three of those missions and look for areas in which you can bring people from across the campus and the community together around those missions.

Q: For the first time in years, the athletic program needs to be subsidized by the University, partly because of the shake-up in the Big East Conference. How will the University support the athletic program and what will that mean for other funded programs?

A: Budgets for complex institutions are always dynamic. They respond to particular needs at particular times. The athletic program—which everybody is really proud of—contributes to the life of the institution, the economic well-being of Syracuse, and the overall quality of life. At the moment it needs some subsidies that are relatively small when compared to the kind of revenue it brings in. We're partners with athletics, just as we are with our artistic and cultural assets, and our major academic programs. We need to always think about this partnership as a dynamic, evolving, and complicated process. I don't view this as set in stone, but rather a response to what is happening in the Big East right now. As that smooths itself out and the program finds other sources of revenue, things may shift back. But one always has to anticipate moments in time when programs need particular help.