

# Thoughtful Presence

CHANCELLOR KENT SYVERUD is known and admired for a leadership style that reflects his personable nature, sharp intellect, passion for listening, and commitment to helping others achieve success

BY CAROL L. BOLL | PHOTOS BY STEVE SARTORI

WHEN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW DEAN KENT SYVERUD called Adrienne Davis to recruit her for a faculty post at the school, Davis says her first thought was—“Wow! I’ve been waiting 10 years for this phone call!” She had worked previously for Syverud during a brief stint as visiting fellow while he was dean at Vanderbilt University Law School and had long hoped for another opportunity to work under him. If she had been predisposed to accept the offer, her conversation with Syverud during a recruitment dinner further sealed the deal. “I was doing my ‘faculty recruitment’ thing, and I expected him to be doing his ‘dean recruitment’ thing,” recalls Davis, a law professor and vice provost at Washington University in St. Louis. “And he really pushed me. He wanted to talk about my articles and my scholarship, and I thought, ‘This guy has actually read my work. And he’s *invested* in it.’ And he kept pushing me to articulate what I needed as a faculty member to move forward to the next step. I was stunned. No dean had ever asked me that before.”

## 12th CHANCELLOR

Chancellor Kent Syverud began his career in higher education as a member of the University of Michigan Law School faculty. He is the fourth Chancellor with ties to the University of Michigan—Chancellors Alexander Winchell (1st), Erastus O. Haven (2nd), and Nancy Cantor (11th) all held either faculty or administration posts there before arriving in Syracuse.

That interaction, Davis says, exemplifies what she calls Syverud’s “Wizard of Oz” quality—“his real understanding of what each person needs to get ‘home.’ He really would press [faculty] to articulate what we needed, and to come up with a sense of what we could do and what the institution could do to support it. It was absolutely extraordinary.”

In January, Syverud left Washington University to begin his tenure as Syracuse University’s 12th Chancellor and President. And friends, former colleagues, and those involved in his selection say his well-documented passion for empowering the highest and best potential in students, faculty, and the institution as a whole will serve SU very well. He’s the type of person, they say, who would rather listen and learn about others than talk about himself. A person of extraordinary intellect as well as deep humility. A collaborator and consensus-builder. A gifted teacher who works hard to know his students “by



name and by story” and who still gratefully acknowledges those who helped shape his own story.

Syverud’s appointment marks a homecoming of sorts for him. A native of Irondequoit, New York, he says he is thrilled with his return to Upstate New York and, specifically, with his new post at Syracuse University—the first college campus he saw as a child. “It was funny, but when the recruiting firm called about the position here, they started to go into this spiel about how despite the snow it really was an okay place to be and that I should consider it,” he says. “But for me, Syracuse was always *the* university when I was growing up. So it was sort of like that line from the movie *Jerry McGuire*—‘You had me at hello!’ People have sometimes

pitched things to me that didn’t feel right. This just felt right. And it still does.”

Search committee members say Syverud was easily the unanimous choice to replace Chancellor Nancy Cantor, who left to assume the top post at Rutgers University-Newark. “On paper, it was clear that we were dealing with someone who showed tremendous skill and ability from not only an administrative standpoint, but also from an academic ability standpoint,” says Ryan Williams, SU’s associate vice president for enrollment management and a member of the search committee. “Then when we met him, it was striking—and I mean *striking*—just how thoughtful he was, how prepared he was. He really understood the nuances of Syracuse University from every standpoint, and he understood some of the trials and tribulations that a school like Syracuse would be going through in Upstate New York, competing against some of the best institutions in the country if not the world.”

Williams says he also was deeply impressed by Syverud’s humility and clear appreciation for the opportunity before

## FIRST DAY

On his first official day as Chancellor, Kent Syverud visited with students on stops all around campus, including the Carnegie Library and the Schine Student Center, where he and his wife, Dr. Ruth Chen, had lunch with a group of students.



him. "It was very apparent that here was someone who really appreciated where he was, appreciated this opportunity to be at a place like Syracuse University, and really was going to make the most of it," Williams says. "He made us feel very proud to be a part of SU during the interview process."

Management professor Kris Byron agrees, citing Syverud's sense of authenticity, strong listening skills, record of achievements, and superior intellect as a potent combination that quickly won over committee members. "It was a true Kent love fest," Byron recalls with a laugh. "When he left the room after his second interview, no one hesitated. I mean, it felt like we were on the second date and we were ready to get married. I'm not exaggerating. And we were a very diverse bunch of people who came in there with different ideas about what the institution needed."

Chancellor Search Committee Chair and SU Trustee Joanne Alper '72 says

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SU's associate vice president for enrollment management

she came away from the interview process impressed not only by Syverud's tremendous intellect, humility, and natural leadership presence, but also by his keen focus on students. "During the first interview, when Kent was given the opportunity to ask questions of the committee members, his first questions were to the students," she says. "During the second round, when we met with him in a smaller group, again his first questions were to the student. Throughout the process, he demonstrated a sincere desire to learn more about the students' backgrounds, lives, interests, needs, and ambitions."

That quality of Syverud's leadership style has been vividly evident since his first days on campus, says Board of Trustees Chairman Richard Thompson G'67. "The first and most important impression about Chancellor Syverud during the interview process was his laser-like focus on the quality of the student experience," Thompson says. "Since he was named Chancellor, there have been dozens of examples of this focus, including his decision to live in a residence hall for two weeks in December. He continues to reach out to students every day in the classrooms, the cafeterias, sporting events, and public gatherings. His commitment to improving the opportunities for every student has already made a big difference for the entire University community."

## PASSION FOR EDUCATION

Syverud took a somewhat circuitous route to the Chancellorship of the university down the road from his childhood home. One of five siblings, including an identical twin, Scott, he developed an early passion for learning—a trait for which he credits his fifth-grade teacher, who challenged him intellectually and refused to let him "drift." Her name? "Shirley Berger," he says. "She only taught at Irondequoit for a year, and I've never seen or heard of her since, but she really transformed my life. She was spectacular." After high school, he attended Georgetown University to study for the foreign service, but eventually opted for graduate study in economics and earned a law degree at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

While at Michigan, Syverud struck up a friendship with a young woman pursuing graduate study in environmental toxicology and public health who rented a room in the same rooming house. "She was dating a Canadian statistician, and I concluded she could do better," he says with a smile. "And, fortunately, she eventually reached that conclusion also." Syverud and the doctoral student, Ruth Chen, married in 1982 and are the parents of three sons: Steven, a business development officer for Coursera; Brian, a graduate student in biomedical engineering at University of Michigan; and David, a



## Q&amp;A

**What do you perceive to be some of the challenges facing Syracuse University?**

I think the key challenges facing Syracuse University are the same ones facing all of higher education today. Technology is changing higher education just as it is changing every other field of endeavor. We cannot be in denial about this. There are some aspects of a great education that will never change, like excellent teaching with face-to-face interaction between teacher and student. But other aspects are going to continue evolving dramatically, and we need to be out in front of it.

I also think we need to pay more attention to our global competitors. Universities have been among the most stable sectors of this nation's economy, but other countries are now investing heavily to overtake us. We need to expand our notion of "competitor" beyond *U.S. News and World Report* and start paying attention to what other countries are doing to try to surpass us.

And, of course, affordability is a big concern. We want students who are hungry for knowledge and for the chance to be the best they can be, whether they come from rich, poor, or middle-class backgrounds. So how do we keep higher education within reach financially? Syracuse University actually has been ahead of most of its peers in this regard, and we need to build on that in ways that are consistent with our values and maintain our ability to deliver an excellent academic experience.

**What do you see as Syracuse University's greatest strengths?**

Syracuse has a history of embracing innovation and of taking risks. Chancellor Tolley's decision to enroll scores of returning World War II soldiers under the newly implemented GI Bill was an incredibly bold move. It also was probably one of the most important strategic decisions made here in the past half-century. That institutional willingness to take risks and respond nimbly to emerging needs will serve us well during this time of rapid change.

We have wonderful students who come here in spite of our long winters. They are resourceful and eager to discover what excites them and where they fit into the world. They are learning from dedicated teachers who are pursuing research discoveries on campus and around the world. Our faculty are not only outstanding scholars and researchers; first and foremost, they are passionate teachers who care about their students and about making Syracuse the best place it can be.

**What are your top priorities in this first year?**

To learn as much about Syracuse University and listen to as many people as I can. I believe that is absolutely necessary in order to practice due diligence before formulating a vision of where we go next. Four things that I do believe will be essential to our long-term success are enhancing undergraduate education and the undergraduate experience; empowering excellent research, especially interdisciplinary research; embracing opportunities for change and innovation; and making Syracuse a leader in empowering and promoting opportunities for veterans.

**Can you give three words to describe yourself?**

Nope. Human beings are complicated and wonderful. Trying to reduce them to three words or 140 characters is exactly what I try never to do.

**What do you see as your strengths?**

I like to listen. I learned long ago that there's so much you can learn just by asking and genuinely hearing what people are saying to you. I also work hard at valuing people as they are and then trying to inspire them, respectfully, to be even more. I also genuinely know what I don't know and want to learn it. As I



get older, I realize how much there still is to learn in every area. That's a joyous discovery for me because there's always something new to learn, and learning and discovery are what keep you young.

**We understand you are an avid reader. What are some of your all-time favorite books?**

For stress relief, I read murder mysteries—right now Colin Cotterill's *Laotian* series. I read aloud to my kids for many, many years, and the best read-aloud book was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My other favorites include Shelby Foote's *The Civil War: A Narrative* and *Water Margin*, a Chinese classic. But I read pretty much everything.

**Other hobbies?**

I love music, especially opera and choral music, and I sang in choirs through high school, college, and while I was dean at Vanderbilt. Of course, music is a big deal in Nashville, so it was quite strenuous. But it was great because it was the one thing I did where it was not possible to think about anything else while doing it, because if you weren't paying attention, you got into trouble. So it was very therapeutic. I also love outdoor activities in any season, like cross-country skiing, canoeing, and kayaking.

graduate of Augsburg College who recently completed an externship in finance and accounting for an assisted living company. (For more on Dr. Ruth Chen, see page 28.)

A defining point in Syverud's law school career came with the opportunity to clerk for a relative newcomer to, and first woman to serve on, the U.S. Supreme Court—Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The experience, he says, was incredibly intense yet deeply rewarding. "Justice O'Connor was extremely kind and understanding, yet also had extremely high standards," he says. "She was a very straight-forward person who calls it as she sees it, and that's a great work environment. You know what to expect. You know to aim high. I enjoyed it terrifically." Syverud says he was particularly struck by O'Connor's capacity for efficiency and kindness even as she shouldered the burden of making life-and-death decisions. "At the time, I didn't realize that was unusual," he says. "I just thought that was the way people in leadership roles behaved. I was really fortunate that this was the first experience I had with someone in a high-pressure, high-demand job, because she did it so well."

He also clerked for U.S. District Court Judge Louis Oberdorfer, during which time he formed a close and lasting friendship with a fellow law clerk, Robert E. Cooper Jr., who now serves as attorney general for Tennessee. Cooper says the two law clerks immediately hit it off. "Kent obviously was incredibly smart," Cooper recalls. "But in addition to being smart, he was just an excellent communicator and a great listener. He was someone who I think had a vision, but was not overwhelmed with himself and by his success. He has always been a humble guy." Cooper says even then he assumed Syverud ultimately would land in academia. "It was clear to anyone who knew him then that wherever he went to teach, he was soon going to be running the place. And that's certainly the way it's turned out," he says.

After a short stint with a private law practice, Syverud entered academia on the urging of the same law school mentor, Allan Smith, who had recommended him for the Supreme Court clerkship. He joined the University of Michigan Law School faculty in 1987 and discovered a passion for teaching. He continued to teach even as he moved into administration, first as dean at Vanderbilt Law School and then at Washington University in St. Louis. In fact, excluding leading a seminar at Washington University in early January, this marks the first semester he has not taught a class. He hopes to add teaching to his schedule next fall.

## CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

Syverud says he has continued teaching because he loves to see those "light bulb" moments students experience as well as the opportunity to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity about the latest research discoveries. In an essay titled "Why I Teach," from the Spring 2009 issue of *Washington University Law Magazine*, he offered yet another reason: "Without

daily exposure to student learning—and to how hard good teaching is—a dean can gradually come to take the ingredients of a great education for granted." One of those essential ingredients—good teaching—begins with "knowing students really well," Syverud says. "Knowing where they're coming from. Knowing what they already think they know, including what they already think they know that's wrong. You need to know them by name and by story. And you need to take them as they are and build from that."

Former colleagues from Washington University say Syverud excelled at building connections with students. "Kent would always think of everything in terms of how this is going to help students," recalls Peter Joy, law professor and former vice dean under Syverud. "Most institutions of higher education in my experience start to think that whatever is good for the teachers or the administrators just has to be good for students—when, in fact, that is not always the case." He also cites Syverud's doggedness in helping students, recalling an instance where one recent graduate was repeatedly stymied by his inability to land a job. "Kent spent an enormous amount of time with the student—talking to him and connecting with the career services office, which in turn put him in touch with an employment coach,"

Joy says. "Kent reached out to different people he knew, and it basically became a joint mission to help this student. He just has such determination. He never gives up. He doesn't give up on students, he doesn't give up on their aspirations, and he conveys that to them."

Washington University's Adrienne Davis says Syverud shows the same regard for faculty and excels as a consensus builder. She remembers the time he brought before the faculty an initiative involving online course offerings that had been in the works for more than a year.

"And then the faculty balked," she recalls. "A lot of deans would have lost their tempers or gotten frustrated and abandoned the effort. But Kent said, 'You know what? You guys are right. Let's do a do-over. Let's get more faculty and staff involved; let's do this from the beginning, and let's do it right.' I was stunned. We did, and we had the same outcome. But this time, everybody bought into it. That part was really illuminating for me—his willingness to say, 'This isn't the process it should've been, and we're going to redo it,' because process is crucial for institutions of higher education."

Scott Syverud, a physician at University of Virginia, says his twin brother never was one to shy away from difficult challenges. "He's very direct," Scott Syverud says. "He doesn't like to avoid problems but rather solve them, including the hard ones where there are strong opinions on multiple sides. The ones that most of us put off or hope will go away or leave for somebody else to take care of. That's not his character."

Syverud has put that quality to work outside the university setting as well, serving as one of two appointed independent trustees for the \$20 billion Deepwater Horizon

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—PETER JOY, Washington University law professor

Dr. Ruth Chen »

## TRACKING TOXINS

DR. RUTH CHEN KNOWS THE HAVOC THAT CHEMICALS can wreak on the human body. As a staff fellow with the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at the National Institutes of Health early in her career, she pursued research that helped expose the damage that even a seemingly benign substance like acetaminophen can cause to the liver of a young child if taken on an empty stomach. As state toxicologist for Tennessee, she worked to assess and control risks posed by industrial contamination and to educate the public on what they could do to avoid or minimize the risk of exposure to toxic elements.

Now Chen, whose spouse, Kent Syverud, became the University's 12th Chancellor in January, brings that wide-ranging expertise to SU. She looks forward to playing multiple roles within the campus community: supporting the Chancellor in his work to enhance the growth and learning experiences of all students; promoting the environmental health of the campus community; and serving as a professor of practice in the College of Engineering and Computer Science. Next fall, she will teach a course on environmental risk assessment and toxicology that will both familiarize students with the skills needed to conduct a risk assessment of a contaminated site and educate them about the effects of toxic substances on the human body. "The outcome of a risk assessment is to protect human health by EPA regulation," says Chen, who holds doctoral and master of public health degrees in environmental toxicology from the University of Michigan and a master's degree in biomedical sciences from the University of Texas Health Science Center, Houston. "But it's also a cost-effective issue. You have to be able, in a very short time, to accomplish the goal of protecting human health while not bankrupting your company. And that's quite a responsibility for a young person. You have to know where to find the best information and how to ensure that the data is of high quality. You have to familiarize yourself with the rules and then understand how to figure out a contaminated site, because no two sites are the same. And then you have to evaluate the human health impact. You need to understand the toxicology of the chemicals, organ by organ, so the regulations will make sense to students and they understand why they are doing the risk assessment."

In her capacity as state toxicologist for Tennessee from 1998 to 2006, Chen oversaw landfills and hazardous waste sites and investigated industrial contamination practices. With a joint grant from the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, she investigated the effects of contamination caused by a chemical company that once led the world in pesticide production. The most rewarding part of the job, she says, was giving residents the information they needed to limit their exposure to, and minimize their risk from, such toxic substances. The greatest challenge? "Convincing people that the truth shall set you free," she says.

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"For example, if samplings show that a house with young children has pesticides in it that are endangering the children's health, they need to know what steps should be taken so the children are not exposed and how we can help them. But their fear is that if they get their house tested and it has pesticides, the value of the house would decrease. Therefore, your phone calls would

not get answered, your fax would go unanswered, your emails would not be answered. You don't want to harass people, but they have little kids, and their fear that decontamination would depress the value of their house is unfounded."

Immediately prior to joining SU, Chen was a faculty member of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Washington University in St. Louis, where she taught courses in environmental risk assessment, energy and environmental economics, and risk management decision making. She also developed and directed a professional engineering master's degree program and an international study abroad program in energy and environmental and chemical engineering. At Syracuse, she hopes to cultivate in her students the kind of skills and expertise that will serve them well whether they choose a career in industry, academia, or government. The need for such specialized knowledge will only grow, she says, as the number of chemicals in the environment continues to proliferate. "We are never going to produce fewer chemicals than we have right now," she says. "And we don't even know all the injurious effects, because there are more chemicals now than we have data on them."

—Carol Boll





## INAUGURATION DAY

The University celebrated Chancellor Kent Syverud's inauguration on April 11 with a number of activities. Clockwise (from top left): Syverud thanks retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor after her speech in Hendricks Chapel; the Chancellor shares his inaugural remarks; a student smiles as he poses with her for a "selfie" photo; the SU Marching Band performs on the Shaw Quad.

Reeher, Syverud said that experience has underscored for him the critical importance of honestly acknowledging risks and taking steps to manage them. "I'm trying to learn from that, and to practice non-avoidance of problems," he said in the interview. "If there's a problem, it's important not to pretend it's not there, or to let your PR efforts overwhelm your self-knowledge."

Syverud's willingness to face issues head-on, listen to diverse stakeholders, and support the aspirations of others speaks to that aspect of leadership that he says he most enjoys: Stewardship. "And by that," he says, "I mean the role of facilitating the success of others and confronting obsta-

cles to people's success and either making it work better or making it get out of the way." Toward that end, he has wasted no time in starting to build relationships with members of his new campus community, launching the "Bleeding Orange" blog available at [chancellor.syr.edu](http://chancellor.syr.edu), spending two weeks in December living in the Brewster-Boland-Brockway student housing complex, touring campus buildings and classrooms, and listening, listening, listening. It's all part of what he calls "the best job in the world."

"There's something special about Syracuse and about what happens in this place," says Syverud, a voracious reader who consumed five volumes on SU history before he even arrived on campus. "These are the best people in the world here. They are scrappy, entrepreneurial, decent people who overachieve relative to the expectations others thrust upon them. And that is just wonderful to see. You see it in the students who play the bells in Crouse College. You see it in the folks who are Otto the Orange. You see it in the classroom. It's special. It is idiosyncratically Syracuse, and it's got to be nurtured and protected and get even better. But that's my job." ‹‹