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Courageous, Resilient Women

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Friday March 12, 2021

By Eric F. Spina

As UD's chief risk officer, Robin Oldfield knows how to plan for a potential crisis, but the pandemic required even her to up her game.

“The only thing that has been certain during this pandemic is uncertainty,” says Robin, who serves as associate vice president of audit, risk, and compliance. “With sudden new discoveries and recommendations changing daily, sometimes hourly, it would leave our heads spinning, giving the word ‘pivot’ a new meaning.”

Robin is a 2021 Women of UD honoree, part of a group of 15 extraordinary women who pivoted with courage and grace during a year rocked by COVID-19, economic uncertainty, and racial and political unrest. Not only did these 15 women pivot themselves — personally and professionally — but they also worked with others to lead our University through this most difficult of years. Together, they're a portrait of resilience and professionalism. [Listen to their inspiring stories](#) and please join me in honoring these outstanding women at a 9 a.m. virtual celebration hosted by the Women's Center on Friday, March 19.

In the spirit of the Marianists, we prepare our students to navigate through a changing world — and thrive. There’s no greater example of that philosophy in action than through the lives of these women. I’m humbled by their can-do attitude and know in my heart that we are a better — and more resilient — university because of the contributions they make every day.

Dr. Mary Buchwalder, our tireless medical director, and Robin Oldfield co-chaired the Path Forward Task Force that brought more than 100 members from across campus together in working groups to develop detailed plans for returning to campus life during the pandemic with measures to lessen the risk of the spread of the virus.

“Every decision was about doing the next right thing, looking out for the most vulnerable in our community. Every decision was about how to emerge stronger out of the crisis,” says honoree Katherine Cleaver, assistant vice president for compliance in environmental health and safety and leader of one of the working groups.

Other honorees adapted their work lives and helped others do so, too. Julianne Morgan in the Office of eLearning answered every frantic email from faculty looking for help transitioning to remote teaching. Julianne taught more than technical skills; she instilled confidence. Sangita Gosalia in the Center for International Programs worked with colleagues to re-imagine new ways of creating greater intercultural and global engagement on campus. Rhonda Mercs, director of ECHO (Empowering Children with Hope and Opportunity), rapidly implemented a Telehealth system that connected local Catholic schoolchildren learning remotely with ECHO’s counselors and social workers. Shauna Adams, executive director of the Center for Early Learning, guided teachers as they developed lesson plans and met virtually with Bombeck Center parents and children during the early days of the pandemic and later generated safety measures that allowed the center to reopen. That gave working parents some breathing room after months of balancing both work and childcare.

Some honorees, like Beth Schwartz and Katy Kelly, provided “caring shoulders” and extra support for colleagues and students. Tiffany Taylor Smith, Kelly Bohrer, and Gerica Brown used their voices to tackle racial injustice and inequality. Sharon Davis Gratto, the first female Graul Endowed Chair in Arts and Languages, continues to help women advance in their careers and works for opportunity for all while simultaneously reinventing the way music education is taught.

Others rose to face life’s unexpected challenges with courage and heart. Shyanne Smith, a graduating sociology major, swallowed her apprehensions about her teaching abilities and prepared her 6-year-old cousin to enter the first grade. Dr. Anne Crecelius accepted extra administrative duties in the department of health and sport science before being diagnosed with a major health challenge.

“Sometimes life hits you with big messy complex stuff that really doesn't have a good answer. You can wallow and complain or you can adapt and modify your life to become accustomed to it. That's what we've all had to do the past year, and what I think I've tried to help others do,” Anne says.

The 2021 Women of UD are teaching us the meaning of the words “character” and “resilience.”

(For a complete list of Women's History Month activities, click [here](#).)