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## Women Leaders as Change Agents: Mary Campbell's Story of Academic and Community Leadership

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Women leaders as change agents:  
Mary Campbell's story of academic and community leadership

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## Introduction

Through this ethnographic study, I had the pleasure of being introduced to Mary Campbell. Mary was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and grew up in a household made up of her mom, her father, and three older brothers. Unlike families that held their daughters and sons to different gendered standards, Mary always received encouragement from her family that she could do whatever her brothers did (see Figure 1). Mary attributes her Catholic upbringing with instilling many of the values that she maintains today, such as giving back to her community. During a service project in which she participated during her senior year of high school, Mary was introduced to two nuns who had devoted their lives to helping inner-city children. From this interaction with those two influential women, Mary was inspired to pursue both a bachelor's and a master's degree in social work with concentrations in marriage and family studies.



**Figure 1:** Mary attributes many of the leadership qualities she developed to her family and her upbringing in Pittsburgh. Reminiscing on key moments in her past allows Mary to appreciate how far she has come and how many people helped her along the way.

*Photo by author*

Mary has lived in the Bloomington-Normal community for over 35 years. Though she taught social work at Illinois State University and occasionally at Illinois Wesleyan University during that period she originally did not think she wanted to teach social work. When she arrived in Bloomington-Normal Mary was surprised by the negative feelings the community had towards mothers in the workforce, making it difficult for Mary to find a job in social work. Fortunately, the female head of the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at ISU requested that Mary apply to be a professor. Reluctantly at first, Mary applied and was accepted for the job, later developing the Department of Social Work with another woman at ISU. Mary has received many awards for her excellence in social work and education, and has served as a role model for many of her students. During and after her career as a professor, Mary has sustained a passion for helping people, especially women and children who are less fortunate than she is.

Her long list of leadership roles in the community includes working with area food banks, the Rotary Club, as well as founding and serving on the board for the Labyrinth Outreach Services for Women, an organization that supports the reintegration of recently incarcerated women and their families.

While Mary's leadership journey is far from complete, several overarching themes emerge from her experiences as an academic and community leader. Much like



**Figure 2:** Mary teaches other women how to lead by her own example. She read me a passage from her favorite book, *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way*, to illustrate to me some of the concepts she finds most important to leadership. For example, “giving voice to your leadership” entails effectively using language to encourage social change to happen.

*Photo by author*

how Mary worked with other leaders to establish the Department of Social Work at Illinois State University, Mary identifies collaboration as a necessary component to her leadership philosophy. Additionally, Mary believes having role models to look up to is extremely helpful in determining what is important to an individual and how to lead effectively.

Throughout Mary's leadership journey, she identifies women at each turning point who have helped to shape her into the leader she is today. Mary also considers

Eleanor Roosevelt to be a key role model that has influenced how she leads and how she can positively change her leadership in the future. A large body of scholarly literature on women's leadership focuses around the debate of whether women are simply “cogs in the machine” or if they are “change agents” (Stainback, Kleiner, & Skaggs, 2016). Through the process of collaborating with Mary, it became evident that women leaders like Mary are agents of change (see Figure 2).

### Assumptions and Early Hypotheses

I am from a small town in Illinois where people have negative views concerning women in leadership. Women from my hometown may have jobs or careers, but they rarely obtain or maintain leadership roles in the community. They are expected to run the family and home, and assist with farming if they are from the country. My diverse experiences with women leaders such as Mary and women who generally do not assume leadership roles made it hard for me to make assumptions about how Mary worked as a leader. Before meeting her, I was not sure what type of leader Mary would be or what type of leadership philosophy she follows.

The current body of scholarly literature pertaining to women's leadership tends to focus on corporate leadership. However, the findings are applicable to nearly all women in leadership roles. Longstanding stereotypes that women are not suited to be long-term employees, for reasons such as potential maternity leaves, still decrease the number of women hired for or promoted to leadership positions (Wynen, Beeck, & Reubens, 2015). When women are promoted to higher positions in a company, or move "above the glass ceiling", they are often placed into high-risk positions, such as CEO of a company with a collapsing infrastructure (Glass & Cook, 2016). Other characteristics such as race can also play a negative role in a woman's experience as a leader. Besides the fact that white women are hired and promoted more frequently than their nonwhite counterparts, Key et al. (2012) found that white privilege still exists among women in the work force, noting that nonwhite women were substantially more likely to have dealt with some form of racial discrimination or harassment during some point in their career. As many resources agree, more women present in leadership positions translates into more women hired for leadership roles.

Prior to reading about female leadership, I was exposed to two different attitudes towards female leadership. The literature I read made it clear that women are consistently faced with obstacles when trying to obtain and maintain a leadership position. However, it also became evident that when women are allowed into leadership roles, consequently more women will also enter leadership positions. For me, the literature led me to believe that because of Mary's successes in leadership, I would not

only find many women who helped her to obtain leadership positions, but also find a chain of other women who she helped to bring into leadership roles.

### Ethnographic Methods

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, I met Mary Campbell for the first time at the Bloomington Coffee Hound to make introductions and review the parameters of this collaborative ethnographic project. We first discussed the IRB protocol, and other details about how the project would progress throughout the semester. I also brought along a sample of an original and an edited photo I had recently produced for an auto-ethnography so that I could illustrate how we might create unique images to serve as visual metaphors in the ethnography (see Figure 3). We spent most of our time simply chatting and getting to know each other. As helpful as it was to learn some of the details of Mary's leadership resume, I found the rapport we developed at our first meeting to be extremely beneficial to the success of the rest of the project.



**Figure 3:** Visual ethnography is not just about the ethnographer taking photos of the subject. It's about using photos to understand how the subject sees the world. Mary took this photo of me and I added the camera to illustrate the collaborative nature of this project.

*Photo by Mary and Author*

I accompanied Mary to a Labyrinth board meeting on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, at the Labyrinth house. Nine members of the board attended the meeting, eight of whom are female. I brought along my notebook and camera so that I could take notes and pictures while I was there. I originally thought I would be a "fly on the wall" and observe the group from a distance while their meeting took place. However, Mary ushered me over to sit at the dining room table where the rest of the group was seated, and then proceeded to encourage all present to introduce themselves, giving me a minute to introduce my project and what I would be doing while I was there. These introductions seemed to ease any concerns the group may have had about a stranger being present

and taking notes at the meeting. After the meeting, Mary gave me a tour of the Labyrinth house and explained what was important to her and described the sorts of images she thought we could produce to illustrate her values. For example, Mary pointed out a banner that she holds near and dear to her heart, which includes signatures from many people who helped to successfully develop Labyrinth Outreach Services to Women and the Labyrinth house (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Mary reflects on the leadership qualities she makes a point to practice. This includes acknowledging the contributions of everyone who helped to make a project she is working on possible.

*Photo by author*

On October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016, I finally formally interviewed Mary in a study room at Ames Library. Before our meeting, I asked Mary to bring important photos or objects that illustrated her story of leadership. We reviewed the objects she brought with her and she told me about a picture of her with her family. This picture was taken at her late-father's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday party, in which she is also accompanied by her three brothers.



**Figure 5:** Mary has received numerous awards for teaching, social work, and community service. She notes that receiving awards requires collaboration. As she says, "I got the awards I have because other people thought I deserved it."

*Photo by author*

Mary also brought along some of the many awards she has received over the years in social work, education, and community justice. Though Mary is a very humble person, showing me her awards helped her explain how much she attributes where she is today to the many people who worked alongside her and helped to build her into a successful leader (see Figure 5). She also brought a copy of one of her favorite books, Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way (2001).



Mary believes having women role models is very important for a woman leader. Having role models like Eleanor Roosevelt has given Mary specific goals to work towards, and allows her to reflect on her own leadership style. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt was known for persevering through extremely tough situations and still being a strong leader. Her determination through hardships inspires Mary to continue leading, even when it is difficult. Mary and I finished the interview by staging photos to help represent some of the important themes from the interview.

### Presentation of Data

Throughout the ethnographic research process, I worked collaboratively with Mary to identify three important characteristics of her leadership philosophy and her story. The first characteristic we identified is collaboration. To simply state that Mary is a good collaborator is an understatement. When I attended the Labyrinth board meeting that Mary directed as chairwoman, it quickly became clear that collaboration is a key component of Mary's leadership philosophy (see Figure 6). Everyone at the meeting seemed very relaxed and self-confident. No one was interrupted mid-thought, but anyone could interject at any time, without feeling like their ideas were ignored or unimportant. Equal attention was given to every thought brought to the table, and Mary thanked everyone for their contributions to the conversation. I believe the relaxed demeanor at the meeting can be attributed to the fact that Mary truly values what everyone had to say and fosters an environment where everyone can feel confident in their position on the board. Mary told me during the Labyrinth house tour that "it only takes **one** house to restart a community." Referring to the location of the Labyrinth house within Bloomington's low-



**Figure 6:** Mary appreciates every person who helped make the Labyrinth house a reality. The pixilation of the house is symbolic of the fact that while the house is always going to need polishing around the edges, Labyrinth will always be home to its residents and welcomed in the community.

*Photo by author*



income, west-side of town, Mary reminded me that every small effort helps to solve a larger issue. For the west-side, one house with safe housing and resources for its residents can help to change negative stereotypes about low-income neighborhoods. However, she does not believe Labyrinth would even exist without the collaboration of everyone involved in its successes. To Mary, collaboration is necessary for success.

When I asked Mary if there are any women leaders she wishes she could meet, she chose her role model, Eleanor Roosevelt (see Figure 7). She follows Eleanor Roosevelt's leadership style carefully, especially those aspects related to being an active and confident speaker. Besides Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary considers the nuns from Pittsburgh, the women with whom she worked when she first arrived at ISU, and several other community leaders as her role models.

With all the positive things Mary contributes to the Bloomington-Normal community, has her impact changed the face of women's leadership in Bloomington-Normal? I believe it has. Mary has had the opportunity to guide students, faculty, and community leaders alike. When I attended the Labyrinth board meeting, I found myself surrounded by eight equally confident and empowered women. As executive director, Mary's influence helped to facilitate the introduction of many other women into leadership positions at Labyrinth. Stainback, Kleiner, and Skaggs' (2016) debate over whether women are simply "cogs in the machine" or "change agents" in leadership sways towards agents of change in Mary's case. As Mary said during the Labyrinth board meeting, "women are getting more empowered... women have had enough." Her positive influence in her many projects has helped to open the doors for countless other women leaders in the Bloomington-Normal community.



**Figure 7:** If Mary was given the opportunity to meet Eleanor Roosevelt, I believe they would work together to make social change. Having a role model means looking up to someone as well as shaping one's life after theirs.

*Photo by author*

### Data Analysis

With all the positive leadership characteristics Mary has and has passed on to other women, she still recognizes that there is a long way to go in women's equality. When I asked Mary if we are in the midst of a surge in women's leadership, she replied, "we have been in the midst of a change for a while, but [change] is very difficult because the same thing a woman does is perceived differently. [Equality] is going to take a long time." Because Mary is a social scientist, she recognizes the many social pressures placed on women in the work force. This insight places Mary in a unique advantage when negative perceptions of her ability to lead based on her gender try to complicate her work. Mary and I discussed whether leadership is something an individual is born with or if they learn it. We concluded that it is typically a combination of both, but must be evaluated on a case by case basis. The leadership philosophy of each woman leader around the world varies, but all women help to influence more women to become leaders (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8:** Mary's role as a leader helps create an environment where women are accepted as leaders. Each woman in this image represents someone Mary has helped to become a successful leader.

*Photo by author*

## Conclusions

For this research project, my goal was to collaborate with Mary Campbell to learn more about her diverse experiences as a woman leader. I have been exposed to environments that inhibit women's leadership, and environments that help to empower women to become better leaders. While it would be nearly impossible to tell the unique stories of all women leaders, working with Mary allowed me to truly see how powerful women can be in creating social change. Her biggest impact in Bloomington-Normal was starting a program to help previously incarcerated women find housing and jobs when no one had assisted them before.

When she first arrived to Bloomington-Normal, women's leadership roles were few and far apart. With Mary's guidance, women of all ages and walks of life have opportunities to lead. Whether it is through her community work or from the lessons she taught her students, many women have been influenced by Mary to pursue their own leadership goals. By meeting Mary, it is now clear that great women leaders collaborate, motivate change in themselves by looking up to other women role models, and help to bring other women into leadership positions.

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