



THE RIGHT
SCIENTIST
in
THE RIGHT
PLACE

WHEN WE ARE VERY YOUNG, WE DO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE THERE ARE LIMITS TO WHAT WE MAY SOMEDAY DO. THIS IS HUMAN NATURE, ESPECIALLY IN AMERICA. WHEN WE GET OLDER, WE REALIZE THAT NOT EVERY DREAM IS POSSIBLE. BUT WE ALSO LEARN THAT THE INVESTMENT OF ENERGY, THE GAINING OF EXPERIENCE, AND THE APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE IS EMPOWERING.

ONE DAY, YOU LOOK AROUND AND REALIZE THERE ARE THINGS YOU CAN DO THAT OTHERS CANNOT. ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU ARE LOOKED TO FOR LEADERSHIP. ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU REALIZE YOU REALLY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE, IF ONLY YOU HAVE THE COURAGE TO DO IT.

—FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE MADELEINE ALBRIGHT,
2003 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS, SMITH COLLEGE

By VIRGINIA RAINEY
Portrait by STEVE LEITCH

Mary Beckerle Takes the Lead at HCI

When you listen to her describe her work and her vision, it becomes clear that Mary C. Beckerle, Ph.D., is the right scientist, in the right place, at the right time. Her August 2006 move from deputy director and senior director of laboratory research to executive director of Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) at the University of Utah makes her one of only five women to head a center recognized by the National Cancer Institute. There are 61 centers in all, so the numbers still make news, though Beckerle would like to see that change.

Like one of her heroes, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Beckerle didn't exactly map out the path that led her to step up and assume a leadership position. But, as was the case with Albright, when she got there, the stakes were high, and she was ready for the challenge. Beckerle's current role is the culmination of her 30 years of focused study, research, teaching, and team-building, all underscored by her abiding passion for science.

From her stint as a student advisor in a 1976 summer research program at the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine, to her postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and on to her work at the U of U, where she joined the biology faculty in 1986, Beckerle's professional life has centered around the study of cells and their movement. "I started out working on a very focused area in science, thinking about it from the perspective of basic biology, always driven by my own curiosity.

"As my work progressed," said Beckerle, who is a professor in both the Department of Oncological Sciences in the medical school and in the biology department, "I began to see the many ways in which the basic science that my team and I were doing in my lab had the potential to have an impact on human health issues."

She readily credits the support of others when she describes her evolution from researcher to executive director. "So many people, including Steve Prescott and Ray White [former executive directors of HCI], have been incredibly creative in helping me identify ways to mesh my own professional aspirations and passions with the opportunities here in cancer research," she said.

"In fact, in 1999, I was just about to take a chair position at Johns Hopkins. But Steve and Ray heard about it, and convinced me to stay here." She smiled and added, "So, here I am, and I've never looked back."

Since 1999, Beckerle has held the Ralph E. and Willia T. Main Presidential Endowed Chair in Cancer Research. Her research has focused on how cells move and stick together: key elements in understanding how cancer spreads through the body. "I really began to see the power in the team approach—bringing diverse expertise and diverse perspectives together," she noted. "I've been involved in team-building at the institute at a number of different levels—first, in my own lab, then among our laboratory research groups at HCI, and now among laboratory, clinical, and population researchers.

"The interests of our investigators range from the fundamental aspects of how genes are regulated and how cells move, all the way to understanding what the specific

disease mechanisms are for colon cancer, sarcoma, melanoma, and other tumor types, to optimizing patient care. At HCI, we build teams to integrate these diverse disciplines. It's a novel way of doing science in the sense that there's a history of focus on individual achievement and individual excellence, rather than team effort and accomplishment. But, at least from my perspective, the problems we most want to tackle, the most



Mary C. Beckerle, Ph.D., traveled with her husband, David Murrell, and their son, David, to Venice last November.

important ones, are those that no individual can really solve alone. I love the synergy that takes place when you bring people with diverse interests together to work on a common goal."

In her first "Director's Report" last August, Beckerle said that she wants HCI to be "among the elite cancer centers in the world." Asked what that would mean, she answered easily. "I want HCI to be recognized by cancer care providers, scientists, and patients around the world as one of the most innovative and *caring* cancer facilities. It means being recognized by our scientific peers as a center that has, through its own research activities, developed new approaches for diagnosis, treatment, or prevention of cancer."

And where is HCI in terms of its accomplishments? "We have tremendous expertise already in understanding the genetics of cancer, and we are using that information to develop strategies for early detection and assessment of cancer risk in patients. Now we are at the stage where we

can mine those molecular mechanisms and hopefully find ways to stop, or at least slow, the course of tumor development."

Beckerle emphasized the importance of the 50-bed Huntsman Cancer Hospital, a 2004 addition to the U health sciences center campus. "It allows us to seamlessly integrate our research and our clinical care," she said. "It gives us the opportunity to move our discoveries into clinical applications as quickly as possible. We give patients the best care available, based on the research of the past 20 years or so. But—and this is major—the hospital lets us actively engage in establishing the *next* generation of approaches to care.

"We have something very unique here," she explained. "We have support for innovation and risk-taking in an environment where people feel respected, trusted, and supported by their colleagues. It's like when my son learned how to walk. He learned, because he was curious—motivated to reach something—but he also felt secure and supported. It's the same for us as scientists at HCI: we have a common vision and someplace we are trying to go, and we feel that our environment really supports us."

Beckerle just may be the ultimate multi-tasker. As her phone rang with yet another conference call and she prepared for a business trip to China (traveling with Jon Huntsman Sr., and Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.), Beckerle exuded energy, tempered with contentment and a remarkably gracious manner. She is president of the American Society for Cell Biology and regularly writes about issues close to her heart, such as practical policies to help women advance in science and fostering international exchange within the cell biology community. How does she manage to keep it all in balance?

"I've been incredibly fortunate to have a supportive husband with a flexible schedule," she explained. "He and our 11-year-old son, David, are such a source of joy to me. They help me stay balanced and aware of another perspective—so important when you have an intense professional life.

"I'm used to working very hard, but we bike ride up City Creek Canyon whenever we can as a family. I love cooking, traveling, and just reading with my son on the couch." ■