

Transforming

LIVES

As she begins her term as the new president of Mount St. Mary's College, Ann McElaney-Johnson shares her passion for the transformative power of education.

BY AARON SMITH

PHOTOS BY CARLOS PUMA

In February, the Mount St. Mary's College Board of Trustees named Ann McElaney-Johnson the 12th president in the College's 86-year history. She assumed leadership of the Mount on July 1, 2011.

In announcing the selection, Michael A. Enright, Board of Trustees chair, said: "This is a historic time in the life of our College, and Dr. McElaney-Johnson will carry forward with energy and vision the mission of Mount St. Mary's College."

McElaney-Johnson succeeds Jacqueline Powers Doud, who served the institution for more than 20 years, including 11 as president.

"Dr. McElaney-Johnson has an appreciation of all the work of Dr. Doud, who did so much for the College and the community," said Sister Barbara Anne Stowasser, provincial of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. "She is standing on the shoulders of a tremendous person who paved the way for a smooth transition. She has an appreciation for the richness of diversity here — not only in our student body, but in our faculty and the community that we serve. She sees the importance of building trust, and her enthusiasm is certainly evident."

Kalamazoo College President Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran used to work closely with McElaney-Johnson at Salem College, where McElaney-Johnson was most recently vice president for academic and student affairs. "She has the capacity to call people together to get things done," Wilson-Oyelaran said. "She is creative, and she is unafraid to make hard decisions when required. I think you all have a real star."

Preparing for her move from Winston-Salem, N.C., to Los Angeles in June, McElaney-Johnson spoke with *The Mount* about her background, core beliefs and hopes for Mount St. Mary's.





President Ann McElaney-Johnson addressed College supporters and students at the Annual Scholarship Luncheon in February on the Chalon Campus.

Among several outstanding candidates, you were chosen to lead the College. Tell us why you chose Mount St. Mary's.

An institution needs to know and live its mission. One thing that struck me about Mount St. Mary's is that people clearly understand the mission, and they live it out with such integrity. It reflects the philosophy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet: serving the underserved. This college provides opportunity to women who might not have it otherwise. That was very compelling.

At Salem, I came to understand what can happen in a space that is designed by and for women, and the transformational power that environment can have in helping women find a voice and prepare for life and purpose.

I'm also getting back to my Catholic education roots — I had an undergraduate Catholic education that was life-changing and informed the way I have lived my life since.

What's at the top of your agenda as you arrive?

Next year is the final year of the current strategic plan, and most of it will have been accomplished by the time Dr. Doud retires. So it will be a good year to plan. Dr. Doud has been incredibly generous with her time. She walked me through the issues and operational structures. I was also able to meet with members of the executive team about their work. They gave me a good sense of the pulse of both campuses.

Rather than coming in with an agenda, I look forward to engaging with the full community as we look to the next five years. That is a community activity — coming up with the priorities and the hopes and dreams.

Several different constituencies have asked if there is an opportunity to expand athletics. At Salem, we developed a competitive intercollegiate athletics program and joined a conference. It brought a lot of energy to our campus, and

I think it's wonderful for women to play competitively. The skills they learn being part of a team are life skills. So that's one area I would love to explore.

Academically, we'll continue to explore programs with the faculty that will bring students to the College. We want majors and programs that are infused with the liberal arts and prepare students professionally for careers that are growing.

How do you approach your role as a leader?

My style is collaborative and collegial. I invite lots of input, and I enjoy spirited debate. We're stronger when we speak candidly to each other and when people feel free to bring different views to the table. I can make much better decisions if I've truly heard the opinions of people who have lenses I don't have. That's important whether it's a small-group decision, a campuswide initiative or a visioning process.

How will your background guide you as president?

I have experience at different colleges as a student, a faculty member and an administrator, so I've seen how they work from various perspectives. Being at a women's college for 13 years has helped me understand the benefits and the challenges of serving first-generation students who do not have a lot of financial means. I have a good understanding of the strategies that can be put in place to support those students and to continue to drive access.

Have you had mentors who helped shape your perspective?

That's a great question — it's one I ask students! My most recent mentor brought me to Salem — Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran. I've always respected her inclusive leadership, integrity and commitment to higher education and the development of women.

As an undergraduate at Holy Cross College, Father Bob Manning, who was the chaplain and a member of the religion faculty, helped me understand and probe my Catholic faith — how it aligns to social justice, makes change in the world and provides a voice for those who do not have one.

Another mentor was my sister Kim McElaney, who served at Holy Cross for 25 years and was head of the chaplain's office. She passed away in 2010. In many ways, I feel this position is a continuation of her legacy. I saw the impact she had on young people, and that has motivated me even further.

What inspires and drives you?

I believe absolutely in the transformative power of education. And I believe that colleges such as Mount St. Mary's have a unique opportunity to change lives in the most concrete and inspirational

ways. When I talk to students and hear what they're about, it gives me such a sense of joy and purpose that I'm happy to put in the long, hard hours.

I really believe that colleges play such an important role in our society and communities. At Mount St. Mary's, what captures my imagination and my heart is the way the College can transform the lives of young women, giving them the opportunity to discover their own possibility and potential.

So after all the long hours, how do you spend your free time?

I love going to movies, stepping away and immersing myself in great stories. I love good food, preparing it and eating it. And I enjoy hiking and running. I'm a slow runner, but it's good mental processing time for me. Los Angeles is a great spot for all those things!

What do you hope your legacy will be at the Mount?

Wow! I hope to help this incredible institution thrive. What that will look like, I don't know. As one person on campus said to me, "We serve the daughters of L.A.," and that has stuck with me. I hope I will have done what I need to do to secure the future of the Mount. I want to leave knowing: job well done.

For President Ann McElaney-Johnson's biography and full CV, visit www.msmc.la.edu/president. ♣



Genevieve (Castellanos) Denault '53, a regent and chair of the Mount Associates (left), and Jessica Sanchez-Caridad '01, a Latina Alumnae Network board member (right), greet President Ann McElaney-Johnson at an alum reception in February at the Doheny Mansion.