

## Service with compassion, grace and excellence

by Ralph C. Martin

At the end of September, Beth Livingstone passed away from a heart attack. We didn't see it coming. She was the Executive Assistant to the Chair of Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph and a big sister to everyone. Beth was so well organized we almost expected that she would have let us know beforehand.

As our shock recedes to sadness, we remember how she made us feel our nobler human emotions and predisposed us to being ready for challenges.

Beth was a real pro in our work place, while making us feel at home. As our Chair, Peter Pauls, noted in a Department blog, "For many, Beth was the first person they encountered when they came to the department and the last person they spoke to, as they finished their stay with us. I can't think of better entrance and exit experiences."

In the week prior to her passing I had been in 2 all-day meetings with 5 other faculty members and Beth. As you may know, academics have the potential to spin a meeting out of control with intense comments on any matter that arises. Several times, as we gained momentum along trajectories receding from the essential issue, we consulted Beth to ask for documentation that might clarify. With a few deft strokes on her keyboard or 3½ steps to a specific shelf of files she would provide the exact sentence, paragraph or hefty file folder that once more focused our discussion.

Small kindnesses may shift the weight of a day ever so slightly toward more collegiality and effectiveness. Beth noticed that we had enthusiastically reached for the cookie tray on the first day and when she became aware that a similar tray was missing on the second day, she used her lunch hour to pick one up for us.

Beth was a special person. However, I think she would want us to realize that many support staff also serve authentically. Beth helped us do our jobs more effectively and with a lighter heart. Other support staff do so as well.

As with a wealth of money or talents, constant use is advisedly modulated by appreciation. When someone goes out of their way to bring cookies, a gift like those offered before, it is small and ordinary and yet uplifting and fully warranting a 'thank-you' each time. It's too late to thank Beth for this gesture but there is plenty of time, in

all places, for all of us to be thankful for ongoing daily kindnesses. I know Beth would have smiled and nodded in agreement.

Faculty members and other professionals tend to approach work with a sense of destiny. We fully intend to make a difference and have learned these aspirations can be realized. However, we may overlook how our support staff, dutifully and competently fill in the details, and more often than we acknowledge, they subtly remind us about gaping holes. Good work and contributions are so often the manifestations of well oiled relationships and team work. Those who know us through daily routines as Beth did, and regardless, continue to help us look good, are gems.

Universities serve society by employing academics with views and approaches which vary and may be in conflict. The quests for knowledge, understanding and wisdom are best engaged in the context of testing, reviewing, debating, listening, revising and testing again. Since we don't always park our egos at the bike rack before a day in academia, it can be challenging for support staff who want us all to do well.

While appreciating that our larger collective purpose is to know more about our puzzling world, support staff may be forgiven for wondering if the less noble interactions of faculty could be improved. Nevertheless, they serve with competence and good humour.

Beth's visitation and funeral was a string of stories about her good humour and her superior competence. It can be difficult for the same person to hold both attributes with such apparent ease and without sacrificing one for the other. Reflecting about Beth helps me to see that many support staff demonstrate a capacity for such balance, even while subjected to many tugs.

Thank-you Beth for showing me how you and so many of your colleagues served and continue to serve with compassion, grace and excellence. We miss you.

*Ralph C. Martin, Ph.D., P.Ag. is the Loblaw Chair, Sustainable Food Production and a Professor at Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph. Comments welcome at [rcmartin@uoguelph.ca](mailto:rcmartin@uoguelph.ca)*