

Building the Next Generation of Maine Leaders:

Learning from the Leadership of Mary Cathcart

by Linda Silka

The University of Maine recently awarded Mary Cathcart an honorary doctorate in recognition of her ground-breaking work helping build the next generation of Maine leaders through Maine NEW (National Education for Women) Leadership, bipartisan training for college women. Cathcart started Maine NEW Leadership in 2009 as an offshoot of a program developed by Rutgers University. Cosponsored by UMaine Cooperative Extension until 2011, Maine NEW Leadership is now solely sponsored by the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center at the University of Maine.

Maine NEW Leadership was established in response to the reality that women are significantly under-represented in legislatures, both nationally and in Maine. Research suggests that women are more likely to run for office if they are encouraged and are exposed to political role models, and Maine NEW Leadership is one of the critical components that help women reach their full civic potential.

The crucial need for Maine NEW Leadership is captured in Cathcart's 2008 Margaret Chase Smith Essay in *Maine Policy Review*, "These Very Impelling Reasons against My Running: Maine Women and Politics." In the essay, she illustrates the many reasons why well-qualified women do not see themselves as having the requisite skills and credentials for pursuing leadership roles and running for office. She also highlights the importance of all eligible people,

regardless of gender, recognizing the leadership they can provide and notes that we must draw on all available talent if we are to have the strong leadership needed in our complex, difficult times.

Mary Cathcart's own story captures some of the challenges to women recognizing themselves as leaders, and the essay instructively highlights some of the barriers we must address to bring more women into the policy leadership arena where they have so much to offer. Cathcart's exposure to politics occurred early. Her parents, one a Democrat and one a Republican, talked politics at the kitchen table and were able to work across their differences. They worked to find commonalities. But, despite this early extensive exposure to political analysis, Cathcart had a sense from her mother



Photograph is courtesy of the University of Maine.

of the challenges that confront women who try to run political office.

Central to leadership, Cathcart notes, is recognizing it is not about the individual alone. In the essay, she highlights the importance of collaboration, friendships, and relationships. Leadership is not done alone; it is not carried out by a single individual. Effective leadership is about teamwork. Cathcart notes that she started her work this way, by learning from others. She learned that nothing is successfully achieved in Augusta without relationships. And these relationships often are built across differences and focus on finding common ground. Success does not occur without listening to the other side. Cathcart points out that even if you don't agree, you still need be civil. She also notes how crucial it is to understand the importance of hard work. Leadership involves a commitment to working hard, recognizing differences, and finding commonalities. She believes it is important to not take things personally, not hold grudges, and not burn bridges. A lack of civility and decorum inevitably stands in the way of achieving effective results.

So how does one take the deep and extensive level of experience of Mary Cathcart and create training opportunities? The first thing Cathcart saw as essential is reaching everyone who has the skills and interest in serving in leadership roles. This means that access to training should be available regardless of whether one has funds to pay for such training. So Maine NEW Leadership is offered at no cost. Students from campuses across the state or who are from Maine but attend college elsewhere apply to participate in Maine NEW Leadership. Participants have diverse incomes, backgrounds, and leadership goals (serving in leadership roles in policy or political arenas, communities, schools, and other venues). A second essential part of Maine NEW Leadership's training is a focus on building relationships and exposure to current leaders. The training is not about learning from textbooks or lectures; it is about seeing leadership in action and learning from Maine women in a range of leadership positions. Leaders are brought to the training, and participants attend a networking reception with campus and community leaders. As a part of the training, they visit the statehouse and see leadership in action. And it is not just the one-week in-person training; the relationships and training continue after the program ends. Participants have leadership mentors who continue to work with them and have opportunities to participate in legislative-shadowing days.

And all of this is paying off. Maine NEW Leadership graduates are making their presence felt in many contexts. They have engaged in campuswide and group leadership positions and have created diversity coalitions at their universities. Graduates have been selected for municipal committees and boards, and some have been elected to their school boards and city councils—a graduate of the 2011 Maine NEW Leadership was recently elected mayor of Belfast. They have been active in political campaigns, and several are currently working for state and federal lawmakers. Some have obtained their “dream jobs” due to skills they learned at Maine NEW Leadership. Most (75 percent) of the graduates stay in Maine. Graduates of New Leadership describe the ways they are changed by the training:

- “I love the fact that the program has inspired me to not wait until I am older to take on a leadership role in my community. I can make the change I want now.”
- “The NEW Leadership program has given me the basic tools I need to pursue my dream of making a difference in my local community as well as ideas on how to expand that mission to the state level. I feel encouraged and empowered and I have made contact with experienced women who have offered to share their wisdom whenever I have a question. This program taught me more about how state government really works than any class I have ever taken.”
- “Maine NEW Leadership helped me sharpen my communication skills, think critically about important issues, and learn to lead with empathy, strength, and grace.”

Mary Cathcart believes the future will be bright if we draw on the examples of leaders from the past. She points to Maine's tradition of outstanding female leaders: Susan Collins, Chellie Pingree, Margaret Chase Smith, Olympia Snowe, and Libby Mitchell. They give us much to build on. Maine has a past filled with powerful exemplars of great leaders and with programs such as Maine NEW Leadership, we will have much to look forward to in the future. By bringing this program to Maine, Mary Cathcart has made a lasting, positive difference in the state—the true measure of a leader.