

Professor Carmi becomes President Carmi

As Prof. Rivka Carmi, the new president at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, takes on the challenge of attracting and retaining top talent to her institution, she is able to draw on her own personal experience.

Thirty years ago, Carmi herself was a young medical student at Jerusalem's Hadassah Medical School, weighing an offer to do her internship at BGU's Soroka University Medical Center. One problem – she had never been to Beersheva, where the university and the hospital are located.

As she debated whether to accept the offer, “It occurred to me that I was thinking throughout my life in an idealistic way, and I saw real opportunity here to turn idealism into action. I'd heard good things about the young medical school at BGU, I really liked the idea of a community-oriented medical school, so I decided to fulfill my ideals and come.”

Moving to Beersheva was indeed considered a radical and idealistic move for a young doctor at the time: very few of her classmates were interested in practicing medicine anywhere in the Israeli periphery and, particularly, in the Negev.

“Those of us who came south shared a conviction that we wanted to make a difference by improving the health of the Negev's underprivileged population.”

Not only did she help achieve that goal, but the decision turned out to be a good career move as well – Carmi's steady rise through the ranks at BGU has made her a role model for Israeli women in academia and medicine. She is the first woman in Israeli academia to serve as university president – following her two-time election to head BGU's Faculty of Health Sciences, where she was the first female dean of a medical school in Israel.

The two top jobs cap an impressive resume. Following completion of her residency in pediatrics and a fellowship in neonatology at Soroka Medical Center, Carmi left Israel for two years for a fellowship in Medical Genetics at Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard University Medical School. Upon her completion, she was offered the opportunity to

remain at Harvard, but once again chose to return to the Negev.

Promoted to full professor in 1995, she is the incumbent of the Kreitman Foundation Chair in Pediatric Genetics with laboratory research focused mainly on the delineation of the clinical manifestations and molecular basis of genetic diseases in the Negev Arab-Bedouin population.



Prof. Rivka Carmi

She has published over 100 articles in the field of medical genetics, and has personally identified 12 new genes and delineated three new syndromes – one of which is known as the Carmi Syndrome. She took a proactive role in the Bedouin community by initiating projects to stem the spread of hereditary diseases. She won a life achievement award by the Yated organization for children with Down Syndrome and an Achievement in Medicine Award by the Beersheva municipality.

All the while, she climbed the administrative ladder at BGU, serving as director of the Genetics Institute at Soroka and holding additional important academic administrative positions in the Faculty of Health Sciences, before she was elected dean.

Her first term as dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences began in 2000, and, following a successful term, she was re-elected. Between 2002 and 2005 she was also the Chairperson of the Israel Association of Medical Deans.

“I view becoming dean of the medical

school as my biggest challenge and in some ways, a bigger achievement than being named university president,” she reflected.

“I feel that I am a role model and I am going to use that position to address issues which I feel are important. I know there are some women who, when they get to top positions, purposely refrain from dealing with gender issues and women's issues, because they don't want to be perceived as too much of a feminist. I don't feel this way. I think I understand the problems that women face – I more than understand them. And I think that along with my other responsibilities, I should really commit myself to improving the situation of women.”

Perhaps the hardest aspect of her new job as BGU president is the fact that she no longer has daily contact with the health care field, to which she had committed so much throughout her adult life.

“Oh,” she exclaims in mock anguish when asked about the transition to life away from medicine. “Now that is a painful subject. It is very, very difficult for me. Even though I haven't been practicing medicine for a while, even while I was Dean, I had a clinic once a week that kept me connected to medicine. I don't have that anymore, and I really miss it.”

Prof. Carmi nevertheless maintains her ties with the medical world and is currently serving on the Scientific Committee of the Israeli Medical Association World Fellowship International Conference, scheduled to take place in April 2007.

“We can attract young Israelis returning home from their post-doctorate training at the top universities in the United States and Europe,” she told the audience at the ceremony where she officially took on her new job. “This is because we offer them open-mindedness, enthusiasm, excitement, commitment, collegiality and a warm atmosphere, which we have succeeded in nurturing and maintaining. It is contagious and invigorating.”

Excerpts by Allison Kaplan Sommer – 21C