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Excellence in Leadership award winner embodies connected, practical leadership [1]



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Two distinct character traits appeared again and again in Distinguished Professor Ruth Ellen Kocher's [3] nomination letters for the 2023 Excellence in Leadership Award: her capacity to connect with colleagues on a personal level and her ability to translate those colleague's needs into practical, actionable plans.

"I'm not doing this for power," Kocher said. "But I see a problem and I see a need and I see people who benefit if we fix this problem."

Professor Kocher was honored at the annual Excellence in Leadership Program Luncheon and Lecture [4] on Nov. 17, and she joins the ranks of many esteemed CU leaders who have received the ELP Award [5] over the years.

Kocher's aptitude for connecting with colleagues, making them feel seen and understood, and translating those experiences into practical solutions was emphasized by all her nominators.

"You know when people say they treat everyone equally? That's exactly how she is," said Bernadette Stewart, Assistant Dean of People, Engagement and Culture. "It's like she does not see hierarchy. She was the first person who routinely talked about staff and the importance of staff equally when she came into the Dean's office."

Professor William Kuskin stated in his nomination letter that Kocher "possesses a rare and unique combination of fearless endurance and human creativity." Similarly, Professor Erika Randall noted the "complex capacity of Professor Kocher's daring" in the way she approaches challenges.

"She isn't afraid to lean into hard questions," Randall said. "And I think that's another space that has made her really unique as a leader and mentor, and then how to deal with them systemically."

Kocher is an award-winning poet and essayist with eight poetry collections published since 1999, the most recent being "godhouse [6]" in October 2023. She expresses a profound interest in the most human facets of individual experiences and a genuine interest in the practical needs and technical workings of a complex organization.

From the beginning, the draw of writing came to Kocher in a nebulous but entirely natural way. She describes herself as a hyperlexic child who stood out from others in a predominantly white working-class neighborhood in Pennsylvania. Bouts of sickness in response to the outside environment led her to spend many summers indoors reading everything from textbooks to short stories to novels.

"I just had a sense, before I wrote, that I was a writer," Kocher said. "As a little kid, I'd never written a thing, but I saw these books that I read and I thought, 'Oh, the person who wrote this book, I'm like them.'"

Her affinity for reading and writing progressed through school, where she'd fall in love with a new writer every year. She and her friends would write brief stories for each other for the fun of it — one-off romantic comedies featuring their most recent crushes. In college, this pursuit of literature and writing expanded in new ways, but also left her conflicted.

An unexpected start … and restart

Kocher grew up in a working-class family and understood the weight of investing in an education. As a consequence, she felt a keen obligation to pursue a sensible degree, and conventional wisdom held that creative writing was not a sensible degree. With that in mind, she began her undergraduate career pursuing journalism and communications.

She struggled that first year with the social dimensions of being a new college student and decided to withdraw in her second year after failing to perform up to her expectations. Instead, she went to work in familiar territory, doing editing and typesetting for Penn State's Daily Collegian newspaper, which ran its own print shop.

A cancer diagnosis at 22 — a recurrence of the thyroid cancer she'd first battled at 15 — brought her back to creative writing and to completing her degree.

"I really thought, 'Who is diagnosed with cancer twice by 22 and then lives until they're 30?'" she recalls. "So I quit my job and reenrolled in school with the help of some mentors and put all of my energy into writing and poetry because I felt like I didn't need a backup career at all."

Over time, Kocher recovered. She earned her bachelor's degree in English from Pennsylvania State University. From there, her exploration of poetry and literature continued as she pursued a master's of fine arts degree in Creative Writing and Ph.D. in American Literate from Arizona State University.

Teaching came as an unexpected joy. Kocher explained that a teaching degree was more of a practical consideration for English majors of all stripes, but it took only a matter of days in her first teaching assistantship in her master's program to fall in love with teaching.

"I was really surprised at how much I loved it because of how much it mattered to the students," Kocher said. "That there were students who were highly receptive and seeking knowledge and seeking guidance and seeking direction. And I think I realized how critical a good instructor was. How critical an instructor was who could empathize with them and their own challenges, and I could empathize with some of the challenges of being 22 and facing adversity."

She describes falling into the Ph.D. program somewhat begrudgingly with the encouragement of a mentor. She wanted most of all to continue teaching, so a Ph.D. provided the most practical path. In the Ph.D. program, her capacity for thorough, analytical thinking found purchase and flourished. She'd found her hive, a place where her creativity and critical thinking could be fully engaged.

To the mountains

Kocher joined CU Boulder as an associate professor in 2006 and became a professor in 2014. Since then, she's served as a chair in the Department of English, associate dean,

senior associate dean for special programs and now as director of strategic programs for of the College of Arts and Sciences. In that time, she continued to teach, write and publish. She's earned dozens of awards and recognition for her writing and her scholarship.

"I see writing and critical inquiry for me as … they are practices. I have a writing practice and I have research practice like someone might have a Pilates practice or yoga practice," Kocher explains. "Because I approach those things that way, it's kind of part of my schema for living. It's part of what I do in the same way that I need to eat vegetables and I need to go for a walk."

During her time serving in the Department of English and the College of Arts and Sciences, Kocher advanced ideas and initiatives informed by the experiences her colleagues in furtherance of greater institutional agility, access and diversity.

Some of her biggest initiatives included a proposal to establish a deanship position focused on diversity (the position later became the Assistant Dean for Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion [7]), proposing a new course prefix "AHUM" for transdisciplinary arts and humanities courses to promote the intersection of disparate disciplines, and a collaboration with Professor Ann Carlos to establish the Lucille Berkeley Buchanan lecture series [8], in honor of the first black woman to earn her bachelor's degree at CU Boulder.

Kocher's day-to-day diligence and compassion left the greatest impression on her colleagues. Stewart has been friends with Kocher since they completed the Excellence in Leadership Program in 2018.

"She has this curiosity that's not interrogating. It's not negative. It's not punitive. It's just like — it's wonderment, it's a gift" Stewart said. "It's a beautiful thing. And she's a freaking genius. I've been in conversations and meetings with her where — I swear to you — I feel like I am watching a Supreme Court Justice."

For Randall, Kocher's instinct to work cooperatively and holistically as a leader, a mentor and a mentee has been a radical learning experience.

"So often people hoard power when they think about being a leader," Randall said. "They hoard what they know to be a leader. So, to mentor in leadership is to also allow oneself to get out of the way so that new leaders, new voices can come forward."

The Excellence in Leadership Award recognizes Kocher's wide-ranging impact on her department, the College of Arts and Sciences and CU Boulder. In 2021, Kocher was recognized with the Excellence in Research, Scholarly and Creative Work award by the Boulder Faculty Assembly and was named a distinguished professor at CU Boulder.

For her, this latest award was as much about the contributions of her colleagues as it was her own.

"The first thing I thought about was how much labor went into it," Kocher said. "I know the labor that goes into an application. I know that my colleagues are very busy and engaged in a million things at once and sitting down to write a comprehensive letter of support or a comprehensive letter of nomination is no small task."

"My first thought was just this gratitude that my colleagues would do this for me, right? It's not easy, and so I was just filled with gratitude."

ELP [9]

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