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Cedar Crest College gets fourth leader in two years

New president, dean of Rutgers women's college, starts in August.

By Genevieve Marshall

Of The Morning Call

May 2, 2008

As the next president of Cedar Crest College, Carmen Twillie Ambar hopes to show students at the Allentown school that women can do it all well, if not perfectly.

Ambar, dean of Douglass College, Rutgers University's all-women residential college, is the mother of 1-year-old triplets. She earned her law degree from Columbia School of Law and master's degree from Princeton University in the same month and year -- May 1994.

On the day she interviewed for the Rutgers job, she told her future boss that he shouldn't think she planned to spend her entire academic career as a dean. Ambar aspired to become a college president.

"She told me that again last spring, a few weeks after she came back from having her beautiful kids," said Barry Qualls, Rutgers' vice president for undergraduate education. "I said to myself, 'Nothing is going to stop this woman's ambition.' She is a powerhouse."

Cedar Crest trustees announced Ambar as their choice to lead the women's college on Thursday, ending two years of instability at the administrative level. It started when longtime President Dorothy Blaney died in July 2006 and saw Blaney's predecessor, Jill Leauber Sherman, abruptly leave last November, four months after she arrived on campus.

Ambar, who will take over in August, said she is excited to become Cedar Crest's 13th president.

"I'm fully committed to women's education and leadership," Ambar said during a phone call from her office in New Brunswick, N.J. "I wanted to work at a college with aspirational goals, and one that is dedicated to helping women pursue careers in non-traditional fields. Cedar Crest felt like the right fit for me."

Ambar, 39, became dean of Douglass College in 2002, making her the youngest dean appointed in its history.

Douglass, formerly the New Jersey College for Women, is a residential program with an academic component. Young women who are accepted to Rutgers can apply to Douglass, where they can live in a women's dorm, take leadership classes and be eligible for certain scholarships.

Before that, Ambar was assistant dean of graduate education at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, from which she holds a master's degree. She also spent four years working in the New York City Law Department.

Although not a graduate of a women's college herself -- her undergraduate degree is from Georgetown University -- Ambar said her passion for women's education comes from her mother, who left the family's home in Little Rock, Ark., for a year when her children were young to earn a doctorate from Texas Woman's University.

"She and my father showed me through their actions that education is important," Ambar said. "It was a time when access to education for women of color was not always a given. She showed me how transformative an education can be."

Ambar will be the first black president of a Lehigh Valley college or university, but she is not the first black leader at Cedar Crest. Blenda J. Wilson has served as acting president since December.

Wilson, former president of California State University-Northridge, had just retired and was newly elected to Cedar Crest's board of trustees when Sherman, who had been vice president for institutional advancement at Haverford College, resigned suddenly -- and without public explanation.

Cynthia Blaschak, chairwoman of the board of trustees, asked Wilson, a Cedar Crest alumna, to step in temporarily while a search took place.

"[Wilson] will remain on campus as acting president while an appropriate transition time is determined," spokeswoman Allison Goodin said in an e-mail. "Once that transition is made, she will be returning to her home in Georgia."

Ambar will be the fourth person to occupy the president's post since Blaney's death. Provost Carol Pullham served as interim president until Sherman came on board.

The frequent changes in leadership did not disrupt the campus as much as some feared, said John Griswold, a professor of chemical and physical sciences.

"We had the faculty and other administrators to help us carry on through an uneasy time," Griswold said. "But we're glad to finally have a president who will be a permanent presence to represent Cedar Crest's image."

Ambar visited Cedar Crest's campus a few times during the interview process and answered questions about the college at forums with faculty, staff and students.

Christa Hagan, a senior from New Hampshire, said Ambar has the warm personality and high energy level she was hoping for in the college's next president.

"We're a small school, so being the president here is very hands-on," said Hagan, managing editor of The Crestiad, Cedar Crest's student newspaper.

Elizabeth Meade, chairwoman of the humanities department, said Ambar gave her confidence that she understands Cedar Crest and its mix of traditional and non-traditional students. About half of the college's 1,900 undergraduates are adult learners.

"She's very committed to women's education, which is most important," Meade said. "She'll push us forward."

Although the number of women's colleges in the United States has dropped from 250 a few decades ago to 60,

Ambar said she believes there is a growing need for them. She led the fight at Rutgers to maintain Douglass' all-women status when the university restructured its colleges a few years ago. (Said Qualls: "She's the reason it still exists.")

"Women's colleges are more relevant today than they have ever been," Ambar said. "We are educating the next group of women leaders. There is no better place for them to grow."

Meade, a philosophy professor and mother herself, said Ambar's balance of a high-profile career and academic life with raising three young children will serve as a real-life example for Cedar Crest's young women.

Ambar is married to Saladin Ambar, a teacher at Princeton High School who will receive his doctorate in political science from Rutgers this month. Their children, Gabrielle, Luke and Daniel, turned 1 in April.

"It's possible to have it all, but it isn't easy," said Ambar, who plays piano and loves professional baseball, though she admits it's difficult to indulge in her hobbies these days. "I try to spend a lot of time with my little babies."

CARMEN TWILLIE AMBAR

Age: 39

Education: Bachelor of science in foreign service, Georgetown University, 1990; master's degree in public affairs, Princeton University, 1994; law degree, Columbia School of Law, 1994

Employment: Assistant corporation counsel, New York City Law Department, 1994-98; director of graduate programs, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton, 1998 to July 2000; assistant dean for graduate education, Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, July 2000 to June 2002; dean of Douglass College at Rutgers University, August 2002 to present

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