

Melissa McGivney

A shot of community

Written by Siddhi Shockey
Photos by Pamela Smith

During her childhood, Melissa Somma McGivney often visited Bechtel's Pharmacy in Statington — a small town about an hour and a half north of Philadelphia.

While a routine visit for most, McGivney found herself in awe of the friendly neighborhood pharmacist, Joe Bechtel. He was well known in Statington for helping neighbors pay their electric bills, contacting local hospitals when people had trouble and generally lending a hand without hesitation to a neighbor in need.

And at Pitt, McGivney — a professor and associate dean for community partnerships at the School of Pharmacy — is willing to do the same. Nearly 20 years later, McGivney credits Bechtel as one of her greatest inspirations for becoming a pharmacist.

McGivney began her journey in 1998 after completing her doctorate in pharmacy and residency at Pitt. She started her career in 1999 as a professor of pharmacy at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre. McGivney began working at UPMC in 2002 where she collaborated closely with physicians to provide medications to patients. Now, after almost 20 years working as a professor at the Pitt School of Pharmacy, McGivney helps coordinate COVID-19 vaccine distribution efforts on campus and throughout Pittsburgh.

While working as a practitioner and teacher, McGivney quickly noticed a disconnect between physicians, pharmacists and the communities they were serving. As she thought back to the role Bechtel played in her hometown, she realized what she needed to do.

"As I continued my training and started working alongside physicians, I wanted to figure out how every community could have a community pharmacy like the one in my hometown,"

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McGivney said. "So the work that I have done is really helping to unravel some of those barriers."

As a leader in the School of Pharmacy, McGivney spends much of her time coordinating programs between the University, the greater Pittsburgh community and other pharmacy schools across the state. Due to the pandemic, much of McGivney's time is spent working at home, and she jokes that her son thinks her job is just to be on the phone all day.

Since the COVID-19 vaccine first became available last December, McGivney has worked to mobilize vaccination efforts in Oakland and surrounding neighborhoods. Realizing that the vaccine would be in short supply for some time, McGivney wanted to ensure that the pharmacy school was prepared with the tools for distribution.

"We wanted to be in the position to have the infrastructure, including the space, the people, the personnel, the policies and procedures, ready to go in whichever way vaccine may become available," McGivney said.

The University tasked her with setting up a clinic in January to vaccinate patient-facing students, which meant joining forces between students, faculty and the Allegheny County Health Department. Around eight hundred health care personnel from six Pittsburgh-area colleges and universities were vaccinated.

One of her first steps in this large undertaking was getting pharmacy students licensed to administer vaccines. Pitt faculty and students from the schools of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Pharmacy, Nursing and Medicine administered shots at the clinic. She then worked with other faculty members, as well as staff at the Petersen Events Center, to set up the main concourse social-distance-style with tables and chairs, and to stock up on the necessary supplies to distribute the vaccines.

Following the success of this clinic, county

health officials contacted McGivney to take on a much bigger project — providing one thousand vaccines to senior citizens in Homewood and the Hill District. Pharmacy students again administered these vaccines, keeping in line with the Schools' goal to help underserved neighborhoods and better exemplify to their students what equitable health care should be, as outlined by the new Pledge of Professionalism oath written this year.

"We had 72 hours to mobilize the entire operation, including working with our community organizations partners. The University's Community Engagement Center leadership knew exactly who to call," McGivney said. "That's what's really inspiring about both of these neighborhoods is they had already been organizing, being

ready for the moment where the vaccine was going to become available."

In true Bechtel fashion, McGivney decided to reach out to various community health care organizers to begin their efforts. Her primary role was to provide the clinical setting to distribute the vaccine.

Shannah Tharp-Gilliam — director of research and evaluation at the Homewood Children's Village, an organization that is improving the lives of Homewood's children and reweaving the fabric of the community in which they live —

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April 7, 2021

10

Alaina Roberts

Telling the truth about history

Written by Diana Velasquez
Photos by Dalia Maeroff

Growing up in Northern California, Alaina Roberts found her history classes to be relatively well-rounded. She learned about Native American history in her school, but as she grew older, and as she became a teacher herself, she learned that most of her students didn't have this kind of background.

"We learned basic Native American history in elementary school, and a lot of it is tied to the mission system, which is in itself somewhat problematic," she said. "But it's the idea that Native people don't exist that I hear from so many of my students all over."

Roberts' interest in combined Native American and African American history stemmed from her own ancestral background. She has both African American and Native American lineage — her father's ancestors were Black and mixed-race people who were owned by Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians.

Not many people are aware that some Native Americans owned Black slaves. Roberts said she spent extensive time researching this combined history, particularly the interactions between Native Americans and Black slaves in Oklahoma, many of whom traveled there on the infamous Trail of Tears in the mid 1800s.

"What does Oklahoma look like, as a space where we have Black people, Native people and white people living there?" Roberts said. "They're trying to call this place home and basically fighting over who should have a claim to this space."

This didn't hold much significance to Roberts during her childhood, but once she got to college, she discovered that she wanted to bring light to the history of people like her ancestors, who have been left out of history books for far too long.

"History is a discipline and a general thing where you don't know what you don't know. How can we understand the Native American experience today, in the modern world, without knowing Native American history?" she said.

"Because even well-meaning people, all we have to go on are stereotypes if we don't know the ac-

tual history and the actual culture."

Even though Roberts has only been at the University for three years, she has already made a significant impact on the history department and the course diversity for Pitt's undergraduate students, according to former student Sydney Massenberg.

So when it came time for Massenberg to propose that Pitt add a mandatory Black studies course, she said there was no one she would have wanted by her side more than Roberts.

Massenberg initially proposed the course in June through a Change.org petition after the massive summer protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. Months later, Massenberg's proposal for a required Black studies course has reached far and beyond its initial roots.

Massenberg, who graduated last year and is now attending law school at New York Univer-

sity, said even though she isn't a student at Pitt anymore, she feels confident that the proposals future is under Roberts' watchful eye.

"She offered to sort of take over for me and do all of these things on my behalf, which I really appreciate because I really trusted her expertise and I knew we were on the same page," Massenberg said.

Roberts has worked closely with John Stoner — a senior lecturer of history, as well as the co-chair of the University Senate's Educational Policies Committee — to get this proposal off of the internet and into the University's formal channels.

Stoner said though the University has not implemented the proposal into its curriculum as of yet, he's impressed with Roberts' dedication to the cause and the proposals driving force to change the way we learn.

"I think it sends a message to the world about

the kind of culture that it wants to create that will make Pitt welcoming to communities that it still struggles to serve, and to attract," he said. "If it's willing to keep fighting this fight, I certainly look forward to having her as a partner and a leader in that regard."

Despite hope for the future of the Black studies course, it might still have a long way to go — as of now, it's working its way slowly through the official channels. Massenberg presented her case to the EPC with Roberts' support late last summer, and now the proposal has moved on to a special committee.

Formed shortly after Massenberg's presentation, this committee consists of members from the Educational Policies Committee, the Uni-

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April 7, 2021

11