DSU Mourns the Passing of Dr. Fatma Helmy

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Dr. Fatma Helmy, 1927-2012

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Delaware State University is mourning the loss of Dr. Fatma M. Helmy, who dedicated her academic career to preparing some of the University's top science students to go onto doctoral studies and research careers.

Dr. Helmy, the founding director of DSU's Minority Access to Research Careers Program, peacefully passed away on Monday, February 13, 2012, at her home in Smyrna, Delaware. She was 84.

At time of her death she was a full professor in the DSU Department of Biological Sciences, where she taught from 1975 until May 2011. Before she came to DSU, she taught in the University of Louisville School of Medicine, Louisville, Ky.; Tulane University, New Orleans, La.; and the University of New Orleans, La.

It was in the Minority Access to Research Careers, commonly known by the acronym MARC, in which she made her indelible "MARC" on the University, positively impacting the career path of many of the University's top science students

Dr. Helmy made it her mission to ensure the minority students were provided an environment that would make research careers possible for them. Toward that goal, she was awarded the Minority Biomedical Research Support grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) from 1980 to 1991.

She initiated the DSU Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) program through a NIH MARC grant in 1988. That grant that was successfully renewed throughout her directorship of the program until 2008. The DSU MARC Program produced 22 students who went on to earn Ph.D.s in biomedical sciences disciplines from prestigious universities throughout the country.

Dr. Noureddine Melikechi, dean of the DSU College of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Technology, said Dr. Helmy's dedication, passion, drive and love provided energy and a vision that led to major successes for the MARC program for a period of 20 years. "Her hard work provided opportunities for students to be prepared to pursue their doctoral degrees at top institutions in the USA," he said. "The success of these students is invariably connected to her and the MARC program."

Other faculty peers also express a deep respect and admiration for her dedicated years at DSU.

"Dr. Helmy's skill as an educator, her mentorship to promising young minds, her tenacious commitment to integrity, and her dedication and generosity to Delaware State University are unequaled in my world," said Richard Driskill, a retired assistant professor of biology who continues to teach at DSU, and was a colleague of Dr. Helmy throughout her entire tenure. "Although I will miss her friendship and kindness dearly, she will remain a wellspring of inspiration for me."

"Dr. Helmy's dedication to students for over 35 years at DSU has positively impacted thousands of students and set a high standard of teaching for us all to aspire," said Dr. Leonard Davis, chair of the Department of Biological Sciences. "However, she will be forever remembered for the focus on her MARC students that has created a nationwide legacy of successful scientists."

Dr. Marquea King, a 1997 DSU MARC graduate, completed her Ph.D in toxicology from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University and currently works as an toxicologist/environmental scientist for the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington D.C. She credits Dr. Helmy as being critically instrumental in her academic and professional development.

"The enriching environment that Dr. Helmy, a.k.a. the MARC Program, has provided me as a fledgling student while in high school, into undergrad, and onto graduate school has no doubt made a profound impact on my life," Dr. King said. "The preparations and provisions bestowed upon me by Dr. F. Helmy and to dozens of other very fortunate individuals have laid the foundation for constant success. Dr. F. Helmy has afforded me both the tools and the opportunities to be a true presence and role model in society as well as a key figure in the future of other promising students' lives."

Dr. Anthea Aikins, a 2004 MARC graduate, said that Dr. Helmy's wisdom and guidance helped her through her graduate program at the University of Missouri.

Dr. King noted that the following passage in Dr. Helmy's most recent NIH Summary Statement sums her standard of dedication:

"The strength of this program is the dogged determination of the program director, Dr. Helmy…There is no other institution in the country that can boast such a high rate of success. Her dedication and commitment must be applauded."

Dr. Anthea A. Aikens, a 2004 DSU MARC graduate who has returned to her alma mater as a visiting professor, said Dr. Helmy took on a role as her mentor when she was freshman and continued to be one after she entered graduate school. She said Dr. Helmy's desire to see all of the MARC students succeed was quite evident in every encounter she had with them.

"One of the techniques Dr. Helmy used to bring the best out of us was in how she always found creative ways to speak 'life' into us," said Dr. Aikins, who completed her Ph.D. in microbiology in 2010 at the University of Missouri. "This challenged all of the MARC students to live up to her expectations."

Dr. Melikechi added that Dr. F. Helmy was an excellent mentor who established long-term relationships with her students, and would be forever remembered for her lifelong commitment and numerous contributions to the educational needs of students, particularly those from minority groups. "Dr. Fatma Helmy has left a mark on DSU, its students, its programs, and its future. I am grateful for her life, her service to others," the dean said. "As she leaves us, Dr. Fatma Helmy gives us one more lesson: Great educators never die; they simply move on before us."

Dr. Helmy (l) received the Minority Access Inc.'s National Role Model Faculty Award in 2008 from an unidentified representative of the organization.

In addition to teaching, Dr. Helmy published 67 scientific articles in scientific refereed journals. She presented her research at 37

international and national professional scientific meetings. She was a member of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB), International Association for Women Bioscientists, Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine, American Association of Anatomist, Sigma Xi, New York Academy of Sciences, and the American Chemical Society.

Due to Dr. Helmy's dedicated work in teaching, research and mentoring, she received the DSU College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Special Award for Excellence in Service for two years, and she was nominated "Who's Who Among America's Teachers." She was the recipient of the DSU Presidential Excellence Award, the DSU Merit Award, the DSU Alumni Association Making a Difference Award, and the 2008 Minority Access Inc. "National Role Model Faculty Award" for Exemplary Achievement in Educating and Motivating Students.

Dr. Helmy received her Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry and Biology from the University of Cairo, in her native Egypt; her Master of Science degree in Hematology and Histology also from the University of Cairo, and her Ph.D. at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

She was married for 33 years to Dr. Marvin Hack, who died in 1999. She is survived by her sister, Dr. Ehsan Helmy of Smyrna (who is also a longtime DSU professor of physics).

There will be a visitation at 10 a.m. Thursday, Feb. 16 at Torbert Funeral Homes downtown Dover location at 61 S. Bradford Street. The family will be there to receive condolences.

A vehicle funeral procession will depart from the funeral home sometime after 10:30 a.m. that same morning to travel to the Lakeside Cemetery on South State Street (next to Silver Lake), where a graveside service will begin at 11 a.m.

According to the funeral home, memorial donations can be made to the American Cancer Society, 92 Reads Way #205, New Castle, DE 19720.

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