



Joan K. Wadlow

SCHOLAR, LEADER, VISIONARY.

By Nancy L. Mergler

LET ME BEGIN BY noting that Joan Wadlow hired me as Director of the University of Oklahoma Honors Program in 1986. Her support of my career is only one example of the highest achievement of academic administrators, which is to develop policies and programs that position students, faculty, and institutions to achieve their greatest potential.

Joan Krueger Wadlow was hired to be Provost at OU in 1986. She was petite (5 feet, 2 inches at most), with striking blue eyes, carefully coiffured blonde hair, and always dressed in pastel suits. At first glance, she appeared to be simply a

lady of leisure. But then you heard her speak in a husky voice with a Midwestern twang and you immediately realized her appearance was deceptive: She was not a woman to be taken lightly.

It was a time of considerable tension at the University following Bill Banowsky's presidency and the hiring of President Frank Horton. Under these circumstances, the faculty was relieved to see Wadlow's very impressive academic credentials, which included a bachelor's degree in international relations and political science at the University of Nebraska; a master's degree in internation-

al relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University; a doctorate in political science from Nebraska; and a certificate from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Prior to moving to OU, she served as Provost at the University of Wyoming. Wadlow was widely published and she obviously understood the importance of public higher education.

The Wadlows lived in a house out in the country near Lake Thunderbird where their two Newfoundland dogs had room to roam. Those dogs were shedders: One accepted

a ride with Wadlow only if one had a lint roller on hand. Her husband, Dick, loved to help entertain, and Wadlow frequently invited faculty and staff to parties that hardly felt "official." The dress code at their home was jeans and flannel shirt, the opposite of Wadlow's office attire.

The first time I saw Wadlow in person, she had called a campus-wide meeting to launch the Strategy for Excellence, a plan aimed to energize faculty and staff by setting achievable goals for the campus and revitalizing OU's role in Oklahoma higher education. The point of strategic planning was to get faculty and staff talking among themselves and collaborating to better serve the students and the state.

This diminutive woman took the podium, looked out at the audience, and forcefully announced that we needed to do better for our students, our state, and, yes, ourselves. And we did: A year later and after what seemed like a million meetings involving just about everyone on campus, we were recommitted to our University.

With her leadership, we created the Academic Program Review, established university-wide general education requirements, established the Office of Academic Research and Reporting, revitalized the Honors Program, created research institutes, and so much more. Instead of beleaguered, we felt determined and exhilarated.

As Honors Director, I saw Joan mostly at the monthly Council of Deans meetings. These meetings included difficult discussions regarding enrollment numbers and budget concerns. During a time of declining enrollments, she framed questions that respected her colleagues and

embodied her sense of building on potential: “How can we encourage faculty to assist with recruiting?”; or “Wouldn’t OU and Oklahoma be better served if many more students studied abroad and became familiar with global issues that impact our state?” The underlying message was that we could and should always try to do better within our budget constraints.

In contrast to her public leadership, she presented a dif-

ferent persona to the Provost’s office staff, including “faculty fellows” who got some time off from teaching and the opportunity to sample academic administration. Wadlow had the wonderful ability to convey a sense of how she valued those she worked with. In the close work of her office, as in her larger “university” work, she served as mentor to the people she worked with and those they served. The work

she accomplished continues to serve us all.

In July 1991, she left OU to become the Chancellor (i.e., President) at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, where it was so cold that even those dogs had to wear boots outside. Wadlow set an upper limit on the thermometer settings on campus, and soon everyone was wearing “Wadlow Wear,” i.e., long underwear and down jackets. Yep, that was Joan

Wadlow: Tough, determined, more than willing to confront challenges, and always mindful of the well-being of those she served. Wadlow died on December 8, 2021, at the age of 89. 📍

Nancy L. Mergler served as a professor of psychology and director of the OU Honors Program before becoming Provost of OU’s Norman campus. She is an inductee of the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame.

EPILOGUE



Mystery Photo: “Wheels of the West”

OU’s Western History Collections has tens of thousands of images covering the university’s 134-year history. Occasionally, the names of individuals have been lost to time—like in this shot of Gamma Phi Beta sorority’s 1956 Sooner Scandals winning act, “Wheels of the West.” If you can help solve the mystery by identifying people in this photo, e-mail us at sooner magazine@ou.edu.