

PROFILE: MELISSA MORRISS-OLSON by Lisa Oram

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## Leading the Change

*Nonprofit guru helps establish new master's program at Bay Path*

When Melissa Morriss-Olson talks about her life, she often uses the word “coalesce”: the coming together of forces and events, the making of one out of several. The newest chapter of her life can be described in these terms, too. This fall, she joined the faculty of Bay Path College to direct a brand-new degree program: a master's in nonprofit management and philanthropy. The first class of students is set to begin this February.

Morriss-Olson, 49, is a leading figure in the world of nonprofit management. She spent 25 years at North Park University in Chicago, where she founded and directed the Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management, one of the first academic programs of its kind in the country. Her husband's job transfer brought her and their two young daughters to Hartford, Connecticut, four years ago; until recently, she continued at North Park, teaching mostly online courses. Despite her long association with the university, Morriss-Olson says her new position at Bay Path feels like a perfect fit at this moment in her life.

Students scamper outside Morriss-Olson's office as she speaks. Two decades of teaching don't seem to have dampened her enthusiasm for students and student life. “Registration is just starting. Everyone is anxious to meet with their advisors,” she says. Morriss-Olson already has a semester at Bay Path under her belt; she's now looking forward to welcoming the nonprofit professionals who will make up the student body of the master's program.

“I've already seen in my undergraduate classes the commitment to service [the college fosters]. I gave a little quiz on the first week of school in my business ethics class—over half of the students are already involved in nonprofits in some way, shape or form,” says Morriss-Olson. “I've had a long-standing commitment to women's education, but I've never taught in a women's college,” she adds. (Bay Path's

undergraduate population is all-women; its graduate programs enroll both women and men.) “It makes all the sense in the world to start a program here in nonprofit management.” Nationwide, women comprise 70 percent of the nonprofit workforce, and 60 percent of leadership positions, she explains.

Developing the talents of women and girls has become a personal passion for Morriss-Olson, whose two daughters, Madeleine, 9, and Grace, 7, were adopted from China. “My girls were throwaways, just because of their gender,” she says. Morriss-Olson and her husband began to learn about the plight of girls in China, she explains, after a colleague at North Park adopted a Chinese girl.

While her daughters have fueled Morriss-Olson's already strong interest in women's issues, furthering professional opportunities for women is only part of what drives her. Morriss-Olson's dedication to nonprofit management is rooted in her lifelong commitments to faith and service. A native Midwesterner, she grew up in a small town in northern Minnesota, the youngest child of four and the only girl. Hers was a religious family that attended church weekly. Her parents, says Morriss-Olson, were “incredibly open-minded” and their faith was “never separated from the helping hand.” In keeping with their example, faith has always been a part of her life, and is intertwined with a deep respect for people's individuality and diversity.

That perspective has, at times, put her at odds with the more prescriptive aspects of institutional religious life. Her prior employer, North Park University, was founded by the Evangelical Covenant Church, which continues to oversee it. “North Park University is a small and complex place,” explains David Horner, who served as president from 1987 to 2004. “Its identity has been forged by two things: being owned by the church,



*Melissa Morriss-Olson*

and its location in [the north side] of Chicago, in what I believe is the most diverse zip code in the United States.” Morriss-Olson says the university's diverse student body and its cutting-edge thinking about management training for the growing nonprofit sector are what drew her to the school. A recent trend toward greater dogmatism, she says, helped draw her away. “They did not hire someone who I thought did great work because of her alternative sexual orientation,” she says by way of example. “It was a decision at odds with what I personally believe in all kinds of ways.”

Is she surprised to find herself in a secular institution, after both North Park and Loyola University Chicago, the Jesuit college where she got her doctorate? “I guess I just don't think in those terms,” she says, scrunching her face as if thinking anew on a familiar subject. “Bay Path is so rooted in values, good values. Their commitment to developing women as leaders, for example, fits really well into my own [notion] of faith.”

That faith has brought her to a local church whose motto is “Worshipping God and Embracing Diversity.” Mor-

riss-Olson says, “I feel like I've finally landed, in the way that this particular congregation enacts its values.” Enacting values—and honoring diversity—are core elements of nonprofit management, she believes. “We have to support the right of organizations to establish themselves and promote their causes, regardless of whether we agree with those causes.”

Morriss-Olson has witnessed, and helped shape, the professionalization of nonprofits and their leadership over the past 30 years. Following the expansion of the nonprofit sector in the 1960s and 70s, a coalition of charities, foundations and corporate giving programs took shape. The Independent Sector, as it's called, has some 550 members today. A parallel academic association formed to sponsor conferences and promote research. These are all things that happen, Morriss-Olson says, when a profession comes into being.

“People working in nonprofits are increasingly saying, ‘We're different,’” she explains. “Of course, nonprofits have to operate with good business practices, but at the core, they have a different orientation.”

She adds that many people have gotten into nonprofit leadership without relevant credentials or training and want that training mid-career, or to facilitate a change of career. “We saw a lot of people in Chicago coming to our program from the for-profit sector, especially after 9/11, people who woke up one morning and said, ‘Ya know, we want to feel like we're making a difference.’”

Morriss-Olson has clearly made a difference herself. “Melissa is one of the most creative people I've had the privilege of working with,” says former North Park president Horner. “She can think outside of the box in powerful ways.” Her leadership and vision is coupled with a commitment to teaching. “Melissa is a fabulous teacher,” says Carol Leary, president of Bay Path. As a teacher, Morriss-Olson says she welcomes the wisdom and expertise of her students and strives to create a community based on respect. She hopes her teaching mirrors the value of embracing diverse perspectives that nonprofit leaders need.

In a couple of months, Morriss-Olson will begin her work of developing leaders in our local nonprofit sector. She'll also be shaping human beings who tend to human needs. And here, again, things coalesce. Morriss-Olson talks, with tears in her eyes, about a family trip back to China last summer. They visited her older daughter's orphanage and saw the nannies who took care of Madeleine during the first year of her life. “Both girls have learned Chinese, so they were able to talk together. The nannies were obviously so pleased, and I felt so proud,” she says. “I know there are thousands of girls for whom the same story can be told.... If only we can right, in some small way, the terrible injustice...by raising strong girls who will be strong women and who will do wonderful things.”

*Lisa Oram is a freelance writer.*