

Spanning the globe

Through work in the United Nations, professor Catherine Bertini hopes to help get women educated the world over

By: Melissa Daniels

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In Catherine Bertini's home in Cortland, N.Y., she has a room of figurines she's collected from around the world. Every piece has a theme - women at work, everything from an African woman carrying water to a jazz singer to a nurse.

As executive director of the United Nations' World Food Programme for 10 years, Bertini has seen her fair share of the plights and pitfalls of women throughout the world. She believes firmly that all women - no matter where they are from - should be well educated.

"The thing that I found from the World Food Programme in traveling around the world for the needs of poor people, the one thing that was most important was to make sure all girls are educated," Bertini said. "When girls have a basic grade school education, it just helps all different kinds of things we're trying to do."



At Syracuse University as a professor in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Bertini has pursued her own passions by organizing a database on what countries around the world support girls' education, including where it is offered, how it is funded and to what degree.

And throughout various positions in humanitarian outreach and in government jobs, Bertini as a professor of public administration can influence students through her tales of humanitarian efforts.

"I love being in the midst of all these really smart students who came to college to get a degree because they want to go change the world," she said. "It's very invigorating to be among them."

The move to a campus was a change from the fast-paced lifestyle that Bertini has held in previous positions. After living all over the world - Rome for 10 years, Washington, D.C., more than once, Chicago and traveling all over the world - the Cortland, N.Y., native is back in her

hometown making the commute to Syracuse to teach at Maxwell.

Bertini was the U.N. leader for humanitarian efforts in the World Food Programme (WFP) from 1992 until 2002, then served as an under secretary-general for Secretary-General Kofi Annan until 2005. That year, she was recruited by Dean Mitchel Wallerstein of Maxwell. More recently, she was appointed senior fellow at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The modest Bertini wouldn't offer that she helped open up the doors for humanitarian ties with North Korea, an international relationship that's still important today. Or, that in just one year at the WFP in 2001, her leadership brought food to 77 million people in 82 countries. Or that she was the winner of the World Food Prize in 2003.

The positions she's held and the differences she's made aren't a source of bragging rights. She simply calls it "incredibly rewarding, really."

Bertini's younger sister, Marianne, said she'd expect nothing less of her sister than being able to organize feeding millions of people around the globe.

"I think that Cathy really goes, 'What's next, now what?'" Marianne said of her elder sister.

Bertini and her father also had a competition going - who could travel to all 50 states first. But there were strict rules. They had to spend the night in the state. No cheating by flying over a state in an airplane. Bertini's father died before the competition could be completed, but she sent Marianne a postcard on her visit from her 49th state, saying, "Dad won."

It was her father's influence that got Bertini into politics. He was a member of the Cortland Common Council, and Bertini would often attend meetings. She said she always knew she wanted to have a political government job.

"I didn't know what or who, but I wanted to help make communities better somehow," she said.

Marilyn Higgins, a close friend of Bertini's for more than two decades and the newly appointed vice president for community engagement and economic impact at SU, said Bertini's humility is overwhelming.

"What's very outstanding about Cathy is that she's had all these very lofty positions and huge responsibilities, and she has carried herself with a great deal of humility and she's not over-impressed with herself," Higgins said. "She's very low-key, doesn't draw attention to herself, but she is one of the finest minds in the United States."

Higgins said she met Bertini originally through Republican political organizations, and then their paths crossed occasionally through different careers as well as positions in Washington, D.C.

"I was so thrilled when she decided to move back to upstate New York," Higgins said.

Currently, Bertini and Higgins are members of the same all-female book club that has been together for more than 20 years.

She said the women pick a theme each year and choose books that are consistent with it. This year, Bertini chose the group's theme - liberty. Higgins said Bertini's extensive global experience adds to the discussions: She understands so much about the world.

Bertini has traveled to almost 100 countries, including most western and some eastern European countries, Africa, Latin America and parts of the Middle East and Asia.

"I have not been to Antarctica," she said. "But every place else, every other continent."

Though she is no longer the leader of the WFP - she served the maximum of two terms - Bertini still recognizes the importance of international aid in easing world hunger and in fostering education.

"Look at all the children; girls and boys should have ability to go to grade school," Bertini said. "It would cost about \$1 billion worldwide to get that done. In this day and age, it's not that much money. There's clearly not enough political welfare to get it done."

After graduating from college, Bertini worked for five years with the New York Republican Party and the National Republican Party. She then got a job in the private sector working with the Container Corporation of America in Chicago, where she worked for 10 years.

"I finally said to myself, since high school, I wanted to be in government, I'm 36 at the time, and I better get there, I better get in the government," Bertini said.

So she got a job in Washington, D.C., but she knew she didn't want to work in just any department. The first job she had full time in the U.S. government was running the welfare programs, running the programs for poor women and children.

From there, Bertini went on to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture as assistant secretary of agriculture for food and consumer services. And in 1992, she took her position as executive director at the WFP.

Bertini was the first American in the history of the U.N. to hold that position, and the third woman in the U.N. system to have ever run an agency. At age 42, she was also the second youngest.

David Colangelo was a graduate assistant to Bertini during summer 2006 compiling information on the research about girls' education.

"I think the importance of having the issue and the issue itself is extremely significant," Colangelo said. "Her experience at the U.N. with the World Food Program brought her very close to many rural and urban situations globally where she could see the effects firsthand of societies that did not value and implement and support girls' education."

Colangelo said Bertini's teaching style is the best he has received as a graduate student at Maxwell.

"In the first class I took with her, I just almost jokingly said, 'Hey we've talked about the U.N. so much it'd be neat if we took a field trip,'" he said.

"She looked at me and said, 'If you organize it, I'll do it.'"

Later that semester, Bertini took about 30 graduate students to spend the day at the U.N. headquarters, taking them behind the scenes to security chambers, committee meetings and introducing them to high-ranking officials.

"The ambassador of Japan was there. ... He parted the group he was speaking with and embraced her," Colangelo said. "The Japanese students couldn't believe he knew her so well."

Sung Lee, a graduate student and law student at SU, took two courses with Bertini last year.

"She's a great professor to learn from, and she brings her past knowledge and experience from private and public sectors," Lee said. "It's really fortunate for me to learn from her."

Lee noted Bertini's importance in creating international relations from her position at the WFP.

"She was one of the first Americans to actually engage in humanitarian operations of North Korea," he said.

But her history only enhances her ability to reach out to students.

"She's just very approachable, really willing to help students any way she can in her capacity,"

Lee said. "Overall, she's really a great professor to have, and Maxwell's really fortunate to have her."

Bertini enjoys her role as a Maxwell professor, especially when it comes to assisting students. After the type of things she's seen and done, she said it's a relief for her to be back at home in upstate New York.

"And now that 18, 19, 20 years I've been doing this kind of work for, now is the idea that I have some extra space."