

Priya McCue takes the helm as chief development officer

Curiosity may be detrimental to cats, but it is also the key to being a good fundraiser, said Priya McCue, who was appointed chief development officer of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in October 2009.

“We are the nosiest people in the world,” she said with a laugh. “We really, really are interested in people and what makes them tick and what motivates them, what makes them want to be interested in and support an organization.”

She’s also intensely curious about the science being done here. During her first months at WHOI, in addition to meeting as many WHOI trustees, corporation members, and donors as she could, she’s visited at least one laboratory every week to talk with scientists and learn about their research and what they need from the institution to keep doing their work.

“There are so many exciting, promising scientific pursuits going on here,” she said. “You meet with one scientist and you think, ‘That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever heard.’ And then the next day you meet with another one and you think, ‘Wait a second, there’s even more!’ It’s great.”

A passion for science

A native of Rochester, N.Y., McCue began working as a fundraiser for Cornell University, her alma mater, a couple of years after graduation. Before embarking on her career, though, she took a little time to explore. She taught English at a school in Thailand and traveled around India, where her father was born.

In 1997 she went to work in the development office at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. Over the next 12 years she rose to the position of associate vice president for development, overseeing programs that generated nearly \$50 million a year in private gifts.

“It was a wonderful place to work, because I had very close partnerships with the scientists there and learned about their work and how to translate it to a lay audience,” she said. The experience showed her that she loved the science aspects of her job as much as the fundraising activities.

“Once I was there a few years I realized, this is absolutely perfect for me,” she



said. “While arts organizations and liberal arts universities are wonderful places and deserve funding, for me, I need to fund-raise for a place that I feel passionate about. And I knew then that wherever I went next would have to be a research institution.”

McCue said WHOI has been fortunate this past year in receiving a good share of federal economic stimulus funding, which has helped compensate for a drop in private contributions traceable to the tough financial climate. Having strong support from both private and public sources is like diversifying one’s own investment portfolio, she said. It protects the institution against economic downturns and can make the difference between an institution that is merely adequate and one that truly excels.

“I think that if we can build our private philanthropy into a solid revenue stream that can particularly fund efforts that federal agencies will not fund—salary support, endowed chairs for our senior scientists, capital improvements, seed funding for innovative high-risk research—that’s where I think we can add value.”

She said her near-term major goal is to devise and execute a five-year fundraising plan that will greatly expand WHOI’s donor base. “We are very fortunate to have a wonderful, very loyal, and very generous

donor base right now,” she said. “One of our opportunities at WHOI is to really sing our song and tell our mission to an even broader audience.”

McCue said her challenges at WHOI will be somewhat different from those she dealt with at Dana-Farber, where the development team had a very visible and popular “brand name” in the Jimmy Fund. Supporting research aimed at defeating childhood and adult cancers, the Jimmy Fund has been active for decades and is the favorite charity of the Boston Red Sox. With 98 percent name recognition in New England, it has vast grass-roots support. Massachusetts drivers can even buy a license plate with the fund’s name and logo on it.

In contrast, McCue said, the wide range and complexity of the ocean-related questions being investigated by WHOI scientists pose a challenge in that the institution’s research can’t be summed up in a single brief statement that potential donors can readily relate to.

Unbiased knowledge about the oceans

In McCue’s view, “environmental advocacy organizations often will take a stance on an issue, which gives them a very clear mission and a very clear message,” she said. “That can be a big advantage when seeking support. But, on the other hand, they do have a biased viewpoint when it comes to societal issues.”

That’s where WHOI stands out.

“WHOI scientists, for the most part, have no agenda beyond pursuing basic research,” she said. “We go out into the ocean and bring back knowledge about how our oceans work, how the oceans affect us, and how our actions affect the oceans. Not all of our research is so obviously and immediately applicable to people. But the discoveries WHOI scientists make provide the foundation for making wiser decisions and policies to deal with many of society’s greatest challenges—from adapting to climate change, to mitigating natural hazards, to managing food, water, and energy resources, even national security. I don’t think there’s any place in the world focusing on ocean sciences that does that as well as we do.”

—Cherie Winner