

cover feature

Mary Black

PRINTER OF THE YEAR

Black, far right, is surrounded in the Heidelberg Center by several third and fourth-year students from the Graphic Communications Management program. It's fair to say that without her, the center would not have been built.

The dynamo entrepreneur leaves an enduring mark as an inspiring and dedicated educator

By Nancy Clark

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In hard hat and steel-toed boots, Mary Black stands amid the scaffolding, diggers and cranes on a construction site on the Ryerson University campus in downtown Toronto. She is conducting a tour of what will be in a year's time the School of Graphic Communications Management's new home, the Heidelberg Center. On the tour is Dr. Ira Levine, then dean of Ryerson's Faculty of Communications and Design. Black, then chair of the GCM school, introduces Levine to the construction workers, who Levine notes, "Mary knew on a first name basis." She introduces him as her boss—at which point the workers begin to laugh. Says Levine: "I think they thought, 'Oh, poor you.'" It seems that, in the nine years Black headed up the school, she created quite a ruckus down the hallowed halls of academia. "Well, yes, she caused me some problems," Levine admits with a chuckle, "but I loved being Mary's boss."

Of all the elegant hats she's worn in her life, a hard hat probably suits Black the best. She is after all a builder—and the Heidelberg Center is but the latest of her construction projects. In her 66 years she has raised two daughters on her own, made herself into a top salesperson with little more to work with than dead accounts, created and nurtured a successful prepress company, recruited students, overhauled curriculum, brought together business rivals to work for a common cause, spearheaded the raising of a \$10.5 million building fund and pushed the construction of the Heidelberg Center through a bureaucratic maze. And she has done all this work with a self-confessed "bloody-mindedness" that perhaps warrants the use of strong headgear.



Black seems to have worn a hard hat from an early age. Born and raised in Montreal with her younger brother, she confesses she wasn't a very good student. "I hated school. When I look back now, I think I wasn't challenged at school. I barely made

it through each grade. It just about killed my mother." Black dropped out after grade 10. The family moved to Deep River, Ontario, not far from Ottawa, where her father worked as a security guard for Atomic Energy Canada. Black wanted to get a job at

HOW WE CHOOSE PRINTER OF THE YEAR

The Printer of the Year Award was created four years ago because we at *Graphic Monthly* wanted to celebrate printers who exemplified the best in this industry. We believe that there is much in the printing industry worth boasting about, particularly the talented and visionary individuals who have built exceptional companies. The vision and drive were perfectly personified in our last three Printers of the Year: Dick Kouwenhoven in 2002, Warren Wilkins in 2003, and Rémi Marcoux in 2004.

Mary Black, our Printer of the Year in 2005, may at first glance seem an unconventional choice. True, she has not built a behemoth of a printing company, but through her work at Ryerson University she has made a truly outstanding contribution to the industry. She has trained and recruited hundreds of talented young people who may not have chosen printing as a career were it not for Black. And, in her crowning achievement, she spearheaded the construction of the Heidelberg Center at Ryerson University.

Moving from its former near-subterranean space in an older part of the campus, the School of Graphic Communications Management made more than a mere physical move. Its own building meant the school had arrived; it had legitimacy and profile on the campus, in the industry, and in the business world at large. Everyone in the industry can bask in its creation.

Mary Black has moved on from her position as chair of the Graphic Communications Management program, though she is still busy as director of liaison and recruitment, trying to entice high school students to a career in printing. But the lady has left an indelible mark.

The Printer of the Year is chosen by the publishers and editors of *Graphic Monthly*. The award is bestowed on an individual who best fits the following criteria: 1. A printer who, in the course of building his or her business, has changed the industry and placed his or her mark upon it. 2. A printer who has also made a contribution to the betterment of the industry as a whole.

Sponsors of the award include Heidelberg Canada and Domtar. Sponsors are not involved in the selection process.



Mary Black
Printer of the Year 2005



Rémi Marcoux
Printer of the Year 2004



Warren Wilkins
Printer of the Year 2003



Dick Kouwenhoven
Printer of the Year 2002

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■ HARD-HATTED AND READY TO BUILD



The Heidelberg Center was Black's crowning achievement at Ryerson. From top left, Black presenting plans for the building; during the groundbreaking ceremony; and, below, helping to pour the last vat of concrete.

Atomic Energy as well, but to do so she needed a high school diploma. She went back to school and did her 11th and 12th grades in one year and—shocking her mother—graduated with honours. “I just worked my little butt off so that I could get that job. It’s always been about goals. If there is something I want, I just go for it.”

She was 19 when she started as an office clerk at Atomic Energy, but soon persuaded her bosses to train her as a technical draftsman. During the years she worked there, Black moved to Ottawa, married, had two daughters and divorced. The split from her husband prompted another move, this time to Toronto, with her girls, six-year-old Heather and four-year-old Brenda, in tow. Black knew no one in Toronto, but soon found a comfortable home as art and later creative director at educational pub-

lisher Ginn and Company, where she worked for 10 years. During that time, amid the hectic pace of working full time and being a single parent, Black also went to night school, earning a BA in Psychology from York University in 1976.

Such unstoppable drive is a common theme that runs through most of the Mary stories gathered for this article. For instance, there are the ones she tells about herself and her early years in the printing industry. One day in 1977, the president of Toronto printing company Graphic Litho Plate, which she knew from her work at the publishing house, asked her to lunch and offered her a job, saying, “Ashton Potter’s got a female rep, so we thought we’d try one out too.”

Black took up the challenge and became the second female printing sales rep in the city. But just because the boss wanted her at

the company, didn’t mean the men in the sales department did. She got very little help or support; they would not let her tag along on their sales calls and certainly no existing accounts were given to her to handle. She was on her own. “When I was out in my car. I used to stop and jot down company information off of signs, wondering what kind of printing each would need,” she says of those early days.

She persevered and succeeded to the extent that when a top sales rep quit the company and it was time to divvy up his customers among the remaining seven reps, Black was given two accounts. “But then I found out that both accounts had been dead for over a year.” Black soon revived them.

It was a tough time for her. “My car had a licence plate with the letters, LZV. One evening after work I’m walking to my car in the company parking lot and I see that someone had taken a marker and written an A between the L and Z. I was devastated.”

“She was tough. She didn’t like us to see her upset,” recalls her daughter Brenda Black of the incident. “It wasn’t easy, but she showed them. Life for women in the printing industry has definitely changed since then, and I think a lot of it has to do with my mother.” Brenda, now 41, worked as a scanner operator at her mother’s prepress house Colour Technologies for two years. “[My sister and I] basically grew up in the business. We’d always accompany her to her office on the weekends.” When Black quit Graphic Litho Plate after six years, she was its top sales rep. The next three years she dabbled in print brokering, worked for two other companies, and in 1986 started up Colour Technologies.

“I’ve learned everything I know about sales from my mother. With her, it’s all about relationship building,” says Black’s oldest daughter Heather Black, now 43. “She stole me just after my graduation from college and persuaded me to come work with her at Colour Technologies.” Heather started as production manager when it was a two-person office and left 13 years later as VP of sales. “We had a deal. I never told her what went on in the lunch room [among the other employees] and she never asked.”

Black ran Colour Technologies for 11 years and during that time became a founding director of the Ontario Prepress Association and served on various committees and the board of the Ontario Printing and Imaging Association. It was through this volunteer work that she met her predecessor at Ryerson, Frank McGuire, who in 1994 on the eve of his retirement, asked Black if she had ever thought about what she’d like to do if she were not running her

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company. She promptly told him, "I'd want your job." At first glance, it seems like a disastrous mix—the feisty entrepreneur used to making things happen quickly facing the slow-to-move bureaucracy of a university.

"Oh, no, it was an exceptionally good fit," says friend and industry colleague Don Gain, president of Harmony Printing Ltd., in Toronto. "Mary brought a fresh perspective to the school and she doesn't let roadblocks discourage her." Gain also points out that very few entrepreneurs would give up being their own boss to take on such a position. "It's difficult to separate yourself from the business that you've built, but Mary to her credit was able to do it." When she went to Ryerson, Black left her managers in charge of Colour Technologies; she sold her company shares in September 2003.

Her daughters were equally enthusiastic about their mother's new career. After all, says Brenda laughing, "If anyone could change academia it would be my mother."

Black, who says she took on the Ryerson position because she was ready for another challenge, may not have changed the university's bureaucracy greatly, but she certainly

bent it, side-stepped it or pushed through it on a regular basis. "I found out very quickly that at Ryerson it was easier to obtain forgiveness than permission," she says.

That was basically her guiding philosophy during her time at Ryerson, says Levine, whose first impression of Black at her job interview was "Just a great deal of confidence. She didn't have an academic background, but she was going to do this anyway."

Assuming the chair of the GCM School, the tasks set out before her were huge. The school's old facilities in Kerr Hall, which Levine describes as "somewhat subterranean" were cramped. The equipment needed updating, as did the curriculum. Recruitment of students for the school had always been a problem. Black explains: "High school students in this country are not sitting at their desks thinking, 'Maybe I'll have a career in printing'—most are not even aware of the printing industry." To address this problem, Black took on an active role in recruitment. Putting her considerable selling skills to work, for the past three years she has traveled to high schools

across the country pitching the Ryerson program and the printing industry to senior students. "When I first arrived at Ryerson, there were 223 students in total in the four-year program, now there's 420 in total."

She finds and retains students the same way she built and retained her clientele when she was running Colour Technologies—by forging strong relationships. Some of her students admit that Black can seem intimidating at first, but says fourth-year GCM student Joan Antonio, "Truly she isn't. She treats her students like they were her own children." Over the years, Black's efforts have included hosting an annual welcome-to-the-school breakfast for the first-years; an individual review of each freshman's first semester marks; hosting an afternoon tea for the second-years; an annual job fair and a wide-open-door policy. She taught a third-year management course and never rested until all third-years were placed in summer internships and all fourth-year graduates placed in permanent positions. "She always said if you can't find a job, come to her and she'll get on the phone and talk to any company on your behalf. Not that she'd get the job for you, but that she'd make sure you got an interview," says Antonio.

"I've never seen that kind of motherly relationship between faculty and students before. She knew all their names. She went to bat for them. Watching her in action was fascinating," says Richard Armstrong, president of Heidelberg Canada, who served on Black's industry advisory board.

The advisory board, made up of a number of top owners and executives in the business, was key to accomplishing Black's next big task—finding new digs for the school. "We knew the school's facilities at Kerr Hall were poor," says Levine. "But there was a huge backlog of facility work needed on various buildings at Ryerson. A new building for the GCM School was not a top priority for the university. It was Mary who wanted the building. It was Mary who had the vision." Part of Black's success in pushing the construction of the Heidelberg Center to the top of Ryerson's priority list was in showing the university administrators that she had the printing industry's support. Only then could she successfully lobby her bosses to allow her to establish a separate, sector-based fundraising initiative. But how did she get all those top dogs to serve on her advisory council? "Oh, I just asked nicely," she says.

"She's very persuasive, very genuine," says Tony Gagliano, executive chairman and CEO of St. Joseph Communications, co-chair of Black's funding initiative and a Ryerson grad. "It's the first time in my

■ GRAND OPENING AND ACCOLADES



Top left, Black with Chris Rudge and Tony Gagliano, co-chairs of the Ryerson fundraising committee, on her left, and Claude Lajeunesse, president of Ryerson on her right, the grand opening of the Heidelberg Center. The building, top right. Below, Black with Rudge and several students after her final Advisory Board meeting as Chair.



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career, in 20-25 years, that everybody came together for the betterment of the industry and we put our competitive rivalries aside." And Gagliano gives full credit for this accomplishment to Black's enthusiasm and passion.

Don Gain and Richard Armstrong, who also served on Black's advisory council, concur. Explains Armstrong: "She's so personally dedicated to the school and to the industry, it's difficult to say no to her."

With the industry on board, Black was well positioned to take advantage of the Ontario government's SuperBuild Growth Fund program announced in the 1999 Ontario budget, which matched government dollars with private sector dollars. The rest, as they say, is history. The school moved into its new building in 2003.

Black stepped down from her post at Ryerson last June, but she will continue, at least for another year, to travel the country recruiting high school graduates for the GCM School. "Now that we have the building, we have to fill it up."

There are, of course, many more Mary stories to tell. All are told with a rueful smile, a chuckle and a large dollop of admiration. They usually end with "wouldn't

want to be on the wrong side of Mary." There's the one in which the crafty negotiator wanted her new updated curriculum to be adopted all at once for all four years, as opposed to the usual policy of adopting it gradually over four years as a set of freshmen go through the school. When the administrators started in on their usual objections, Black whipped out of her back pocket a student survey she had done that overwhelmingly supported her view. She got her way.

And then there's the one in which the wily manager snuck a fourth-year student lounge into the new building, even though SuperBuild would not fund such a place, by labelling the lounge a project room on the plans. There's the dotting grandmother, still forging strong relationships, taking her grandchildren on trips hither and yon to "really get to know them." There's the lady who hangs out whenever she can at her much-loved cottage north of Toronto. There's the den mother, at her last advisory board meeting at the Heidelberg Center, rendered speechless (at least for a moment) by a cake and 200 of her students in the lobby shouting, "Surprise!" There's the respected industry veteran "almost losing it" at last

spring's gala dinner, when the Canadian Printing Industries Association awarded her a lifetime achievement award. When she got to the front and turned around the whole place was standing and applauding.

And finally there's the builder in hardhat and steel-toed boots in a story people have been reluctant to speak about. It seems the Ryerson bureaucracy wanted to combine the new GCM with the new engineering school facilities in one building. Black objected, in part because funding was raised on the basis that GCM would get its own building, but also because there's no way in hell her school was going to be swallowed up by the much larger engineering school. The fight went all the way to the top brass at Ryerson. No one's talking about what went on in those meetings, but Black came out the winner. The last line of this article goes to Black's former boss, Ira Levine. When asked, would the Heidelberg Center be standing if Mary Black had not come to Ryerson? "No way," he answered, still chuckling. "That spot would still be a parking lot." ■

Freelance writer Nancy Clark is the former editor of Graphic Monthly.