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*Inspiring
Woman
Leader*

PWAROME.ORG

by *Danielle DeVine* | Leadership Writer | Professional Women's Association

Build a Life That Gives Back: Real Advice for Real Life

From Naples to Brown University and finally settling in at John Cabot University in Rome. Michèle takes us on her journey from the corporate world to education.

Michèle Favorite is Executive Director of the Center for Graduate Studies, Director of Career Services and a professor at John Cabot University. She is also the Coordinator of educational initiatives linked to sustainability. A communications expert and educator, her career spans international consulting, corporate leadership, and academia. After working with global firms and spending a decade at Eni, where she was the youngest female manager, she moved into education, where she now teaches and helps students navigate an increasingly complex job market.

A graduate in History and French at Brown University and with a Master's and PhD from Oxford, she works closely with students on career strategy and professional development. She is passionate about sustainability and focuses on embedding sustainability programs and promoting SDGs. She volunteered many years ago working alongside Sister Eugenia Bonetti, supporting women affected by trafficking, something that clearly still informs how she thinks about independence and responsibility.

I meet with her on a sunlit spring morning in her office at John Cabot University, where her presence, precise, composed, and quietly commanding, fills the room before she says a word. She is wearing a chic dark denim ensemble and greets me with a brisk handshake and a warm smile. Incisive and engaging, she carries an air of authority that immediately commands respect, part headmistress, part tough-love career coach, as I would soon discover.

Sometimes, in doing these interviews, I meet women who appear soft but have a core of steel. After speaking with Michèle, I realize she is the opposite: someone who can seem firm, even slightly intimidating, but underneath carries a deep sense of conviction, humility and altruism.

Describe yourself in three words

Curious, energetic, and always ridiculously hungry.

What is something surprising that most people might be surprised to learn about you?

I drive better than most men I know.

Other than food and water, what three things would you choose to have on a desert island?

Marguerite Yourcenar's Memoirs of Hadrian, Beethoven's complete works, and a set of binoculars.

Growing up in Naples

Tell us about your background.

I grew up in Naples, the most beautiful city in the world. My family settled there by pure chance. My father was a young American from Minnesota who, after having received an extraordinary education in the Classics by the



Jesusuits, came to Italy for what was supposed to be a short stay to explore everything he had studied. He fell in love with my mother (they first spoke in Latin) and eventually stayed for the rest of his life. He found a job at the NATO base in Naples, which was established in the early 1950's, and became the chief spokesperson there. He loved his job and never left it.

My mother was from northern Italy but grew up in Rome, where she was active in the Resistance against the Nazis, and earned the Military Bronze Cross for her work (her father was in charge of the military Resistance against the Nazis in Rome). After she got married, she became a journalist and worked for Italian media and for Time-Life.

Growing up in Naples was wonderful.

The people are friendly and relaxed, the weather allows for swimming from Spring until Fall, and Capri and Ischia are around the corner. Although my parents made me switch from Italian to American schools a lot - just to make sure I could get the best of both systems- and I felt the craziness of having to switch friends and schools over and over, I had an amazingly happy childhood and adolescence.

One of the most important things I took away from Naples was a deep love for the sea, and everything having to do with it. Even today, Naples and most sea places are my "happy places". I also learned how to drive. Today I can drive anywhere in the world, and survive.

MICHELE FAVORITE, Executive Director of the Center for Graduate Studies and Director of Career Services at John Cabot University.

At 18, I moved to the US where I went to Brown. I discovered a whole new world of intellectual opportunities and challenges, fell in love and made friends that are still important to me today. Then I continued with a Master's and a Ph.D. at Oxford. Looking back, my university years were some of the happiest and most influential in my life.

If you weren't doing what you're doing now, what would you be?



I would love to be a journalist.

Alternatively, I would want to work with adolescents and children in a nonprofit capacity, ideally in the field, in places where I could truly make a difference. There are many parts of the world where girls don't have access to education, and we often forget how critical that is – not just for the girls themselves, but for society as a whole. Educated women create a powerful ripple effect. Societies where women are not empowered are disadvantaged societies.

Is your current job the one you dreamed of when you were young?

No. I always dreamed of being a journalist and travelling the world. I got close to that when I worked as Head of International Media for ENI, when I did

travel the world and worked with journalists. But after years of that, I ***realized that I wanted to balance work with my growing family***, so I chose to shift to academics, which offered a perfect combination for stimulating intellectual work, a good work-life balance and helping young people.

Given your background in media and communications, journalism was clearly a natural path at one point. What was it about journalism that attracted you then and what still attracts you today?

It's the curiosity that's embedded in that kind of work. You're constantly trying to understand what's happening in the world and then explaining it in a clear, accessible way to others. I find it fascinating to have that as your job. And, of course, I love writing.

Working at a university has given me a fantastic opportunity to help young people improve their potential. I believe that all of us are gifted with unique and special traits. In some, these are more evident than in others. A teacher's role should be to make those special traits emerge and help a student achieve his or her full potential, and never give up on a student.

The job I now have is one of the most fulfilling I can imagine. John Cabot is a special place because it brings in students from over 80 countries. It's a very diverse group, but they all share a desire to step out of their comfort zones, to test themselves. Even the Italian students embrace a new educational system and study in English. As a result, they create a community that is welcoming and supportive -it's a home away from home. Although I don't earn the salary of a top manager like I did at ENI, there is an intellectual and emotional reward in this that is hard to find in business.

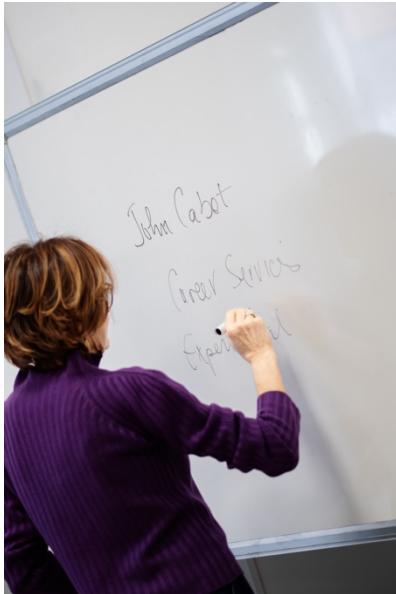
What prompted your transition from the corporate world to education?

I had my daughter when I was 40, and I had to decide what kind of mother I wanted to be. I had already had a significant career, so I felt I could step back and dedicate more time to raising her.

I did sacrifice part of my corporate career, but I'm very happy with that decision. At the same time, ***I developed another side of my professional life through teaching, which has been incredibly fulfilling.***

How did that transition take shape once you made the decision?

I started off teaching a few courses and then was asked to take on other roles. I initially taught



communication, which aligned with my previous background at ENI as Head of International Media.

Now I teach communication, public relations, sustainability and professional development. Plus, I have administrative roles as head of career services and of the graduate center, and I coordinate academic-related sustainability initiatives. I also consult privately on communication and sustainability issues with private and nonprofit organizations.

What is the most rewarding part about your role today at John Cabot?

The most rewarding part is giving students opportunities that can transform their lives. Sometimes you see the results in a month, sometimes after years.

Some come back and tell you, others don't, but their parents do. A lot hate you while you are putting them through the grind. Just yesterday I received a note from an alumna who thanked me for pushing her to "aim higher."

And the most challenging part?

The most challenging part is helping students understand what they need when they don't yet see it themselves.

They underestimate the challenges they are facing. So, you try to help them, but you also have to convince them. Sometimes they don't get it at all, and only later they come back and say "***You were right.***"

Hands on experience....

What advice would you give to young people entering the workforce today?

The job market is becoming increasingly difficult and unpredictable. Many industries are not hiring, and AI is replacing a lot of entry-level roles. This is breaking the social contract between employers and young people. How are young graduates supposed to get their foot in the door and develop experience if junior jobs are being devoured by AI? And what will companies do when they don't have a pipeline of skilled young workers ready to take the place of the ageing middle managers?

This is just the beginning of AI's revolutionary impact on work, cognition, prospects, life.

My advice is: first, ***develop critical thinking and intellectual rigor***, push yourself to learn how to do the things that AI can't do. Don't limit yourself to technical subjects. Study the Humanities and Social Sciences. History, Philosophy, Anthropology can teach us so much about what drives people, the essential human element that AI can't replicate. I don't think it's a coincidence that Daniela Amodei, the co-founder of Anthropic, majored in English Literature.

Second, get as much hands-on experience as possible while you're still in school. Do internships, volunteer work, apprenticeships. Earn certificates and microcredentials—anything that helps you build real skills and stand out.

Third, become familiar with AI and learn how to use it responsibly and efficiently. Even if you're not in a technical field, employers expect you to understand how it works because it will be pervasive, everywhere. Certificates, courses, projects and any other AI-related experience can help demonstrate that.

Finally, you have to invest in your professional presence. Have a strong resume that proves your ability for sophisticated critical thinking, flexibility, creativity and empathy, besides the thematic knowledge that comes from your education. Prove your skills and show off your accomplishments through a portfolio. And have a strong LinkedIn profile. Employers scan your resume quickly, but they'll spend more time trying to really get to know you on LinkedIn: what you post, what you engage with, who you follow. Many young people underestimate how important this is.

What about social media, does it impact hiring decisions?

Very much so. Employers will look at your social media. They can even access content you think has been deleted. I've seen candidates rejected because of what employers found online. Everything you post contributes to your professional image. In a digital world, there is nowhere to hide.

AI in education....

What are your thoughts on AI tools like ChatGPT, especially in education?

AI is one of the biggest challenges education, and society, are facing. Students are starting to use it in elementary school. In the US, some schools have already embedded it in their elementary curricula. But who is teaching the kids to use it responsibly? And who is training the teachers and school administrators? There is a pervasive gold rush mentality and feeling of not wanting to be left behind, but little understanding of the impact AI can have across the board, especially on children and adolescents.

We underestimate the huge psychological costs- the so-called psychological debt- that comes with AI, from cognitive offloading to weakened social connections.

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Educators can make a big difference and need to step up to the challenge. So many teachers are worried about kids cheating with AI.

They would cheat less if the teachers understood how to embed AI effectively in their teaching. But who is teaching the teachers?

We are starting to see a lot of pushback against AI from young people, and not only. In the US, only 18% of Gen Z feels hopeful about AI, and only half feel that the benefits

outweigh the risks. College graduates are booing commencement speakers who promise an AI wonderland. Many young people are starting to see AI as a curse, and this feeling is shared by many in low-income brackets.

This is especially true in the US, where politicians and AI founders are galloping ahead without ethical guardrails, planning and regulation. The feeling in Europe is less negative. The Nordic countries, for example, have found a way of embedding AI in their work culture in a way that is inclusive and that makes sense.

If you had a magic wand, how would you improve the way AI is used in education?

We have to find a way of embedding AI in education while sharpening students' ability to use it ethically, responsibly and efficiently. Students will need high-level critical thinking to dig deep, spot biases and ask the difficult questions that AI can't answer.



Did you ever have a mentor?

Yes, I've had several mentors, great professors and amazing colleagues. My father was a great Catholic and would boil things down to what's right and wrong, with a great sense of humor. ***But my most important mentor was my mother.*** She was a journalist and a Resistance fighter, and she played a crucial role in shaping my life.

How did your mother influence your career? She was tough but supportive. She was the daughter of a general, and there was no messing

with her. Also, there was no such thing as sitting around. I still feel a little guilty when I relax in front of a movie.

She was always there when I needed her. For example, when I accepted a job at ENI, it was assumed that I could write well in both English and Italian. In reality, I hadn't written in Italian for years. I had an Italian high school diploma, but that was the last time I had really used the language in writing.

I was hired as a speechwriter for the president of the company, and the first speech I wrote was completely incomprehensible. The president's secretaries told me, "We're not even going to show this to him; you need to fix it first." I was lost. So I went to my mother and asked her to teach me how to write in Italian. Every



evening after dinner we would sit together, and she would make me rewrite everything, again and again. It was intense, but it worked. She taught me how to write well. But I am still learning!

What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?

In career-planning, follow the money, but don't forget your values.

When you're choosing a career, look at the industries where investment is flowing—those are the sectors that will grow.

But don't compromise on what's right for you. Ultimately, you need to choose a company that is aligned with your values.

Passion is important, but if you pursue a field that has no opportunities, you won't be able to sustain yourself.

Can you give an example of that advice in practice?

Students often tell me they want to work in NGOs because they're passionate about helping others. I tell them that's admirable, but NGOs are not always hiring, and most entry level roles are poorly paid. You have to be practical. You can start in a more financially stable sector, build your independence, and later transition into something more passion-driven. But you can't ignore the need to support yourself and pay your bills.

Women's Financial independence....

You speak strongly about financial independence for women. Why is that so important to you?

Women have to be financially independent. It's essential.

At some point in life, circumstances can change, relationships end, situations shift, and if you are not financially independent, you may not have the freedom to make the choices you need to make.

I've seen too many women who wanted to change their lives but couldn't afford to. That's not a position any woman should be in. *Financial independence gives you freedom.*

Did that mindset come from your mother as well?

Yes, very much so. My mother was extremely independent, and she always emphasized the importance of education, hard work, and building a strong career. But it also comes from observing others—friends and relatives who found themselves stuck because they didn't have the financial means to make a change.

That perspective on independence is also shaped by your experience beyond the corporate and academic world. You mentioned volunteering – can you speak about that experience?



One of the most rewarding experiences I had was working with young Nigerian girls

who had been trafficked into prostitution.

There were extraordinary nuns who would go out at night to reach them on the streets. I went with them to engage these girls and speak with them.

What struck me most was that the first thing many of them asked was, “Do you have a Bible?” That created an immediate connection. They were constantly being watched; their traffickers were nearby, controlling them, so interaction was limited. But you could feel how much they longed for human contact. Many didn't have their passports, and before leaving their countries they had undergone rituals: voodoo practices meant to make them believe they were cursed if they tried to escape. That psychological control was incredibly powerful. The nuns' role was simply to let them know “we are here.” If they ever chose to leave, there would be somewhere safe for them to go. But it's extremely difficult for them to break away.

You're an advocate for fair access to education and training for underprivileged women. Can you elaborate on this?

Education changes people's lives. It should be an unalienable right for every human being because everyone has the right to self-improvement and fulfillment, and nothing like education achieves that.

When women are educated, they help build more resilient, stable and equal societies; it's a win-win for everyone. They are less likely to marry young, are healthier and raise healthier families, earn higher incomes and contribute to economic growth. Yet over 100 million girls don't go to school. Only two thirds of girls in low-income countries complete primary education and only 1 in 3 complete secondary school. The World Bank estimates that the loss in lifetime productivity and earnings reaches up to \$30 TN worldwide.

I think it's hard for us to even imagine the difficult situations that exist in some parts of the world. And because there is nothing better than learning about this from people in the field, I often ask women who are in the front lines of women's education to speak at John Cabot, and to share their testimonies. We've heard from female visionaries and heroes -many of them Malala Fund Winners- from Pakistan, Nigeria and Colombia, who are fighting to deliver education to girls in their countries, even at considerable risk.

You mentioned a leadership initiative; can you tell us more about that?

We've launched a ***Women in Leadership program***. It's selective: you need a strong academic record to participate, and it's designed to connect students with senior women leaders who can mentor them. The goal is to expose these young women to high-level role models and give them the tools and confidence to advance professionally. The response has been incredible—the students are very engaged and motivated.

What role has the Professional Women's Association of Rome played in your work?



The PWA has been a tremendous support. It has connected me with senior leaders and created opportunities for collaboration. It's an exceptional organization, and the women involved are not only highly accomplished but also genuinely supportive of one another. ***When women support each other, there's a unique energy and strength that comes from that, and this is true for the PWA.***

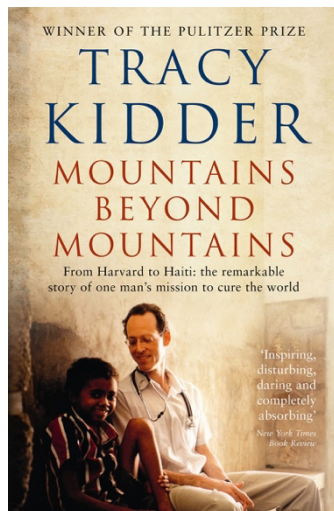
How has your leadership style changed over time?

I have become a different leader over time, and I am constantly trying to improve. *One big lesson time has taught me is to be humble.* I don't have all the answers to problems that get more complex, so

I need to create an environment that stimulates the members of a team to want to contribute, stretch their minds, think creatively, feel supported and enjoy working together. I have learned to respect and value the individuals behind the employees. I think that most people really do want to achieve their best, but each one has a different way of operating. Understanding what drives people and allows them to reach their potential is crucial. I have also learned to delegate and leave people room and space. This helps create a sense of responsibility and accountability. It's important to set clear objectives, so people know what they are getting measured against. I have learned to listen more, both to what people say and to what they don't say. Also, no matter what, everyone deserves respect and kindness.

All of this has taught me to be more patient, empathetic and respectful. But I still have a long way to go. I can only improve with the help of the people around me. And right now I have the best team I could hope for, a group of young women that is top notch. I learn from them every day.

Is there a book, podcast, or work of art that has had a profound impact on you?



My favorite author is Marcel Proust; his work has stayed with me deeply. One book that had a major impact on me is Tracey Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, about Paul Farmer. He was a Harvard-educated doctor who devoted his life to providing medical care to some of the poorest communities, starting in Haiti. What struck me most was his complete selflessness: he gave his life to helping others. He died quite young, but he had an incredible impact and made a real difference. That book stayed with me because of the example he set.

I'm also deeply inspired by people whose work often goes unnoticed, especially missionary nuns. Many of them go into extremely difficult environments with very few resources, sometime just a jeep and a little cash, but they remain positive and are inspirational. To me, they are true heroes.

Education is the best investment....

Who are the women who have inspired you most in your life?

My mother, without question. ***She lived through the war, and during that time, she helped save many Jewish families.*** She would receive lists from the Ministry of the Interior of Jewish people who were going to be arrested, and she would go to their homes before the police arrived to warn them to escape.

She never spoke about it easily, and when she did, she would become emotional. Her father was on the SS' most wanted list, so the family had to split up and sleep in different places every night. Eventually, he was caught and imprisoned. She was only twenty years old at the time, and she risked her life every day. I think about that often: what gives someone the courage to act like that? Some of it is circumstance, but a lot is character. She certainly had a lot of courage and character.

If you could use a magic wand to change something in the world, particularly in relation to sustainability, what would you do?

I would make policymakers, politicians and business people be accountable for what they do to the planet. Too often, the environmental emergency is ignored or postponed, as if it were somebody else's problem, as if it weren't real or imminent. Short-term solutions that bring in votes and profit are easy but irresponsible, because they are only pushing the problem somewhere else -usually to the developing world- or down the line -to the next generation.



I also think it's myopic, because sustainably-minded policies and business strategies help mitigate environmental risk, which impacts all crucial sectors, from food to health to finance.

Harming the planet is a crime because it affects our inalienable right to a healthy life. I know my daughter will have a much more difficult life than I had, because of the worsening of the state the planet. I think we owe this to our children.

What gives you hope right now?

Young people.

How do you recharge after intense periods of work?

I walk. I spend time outdoors, often hiking, or by the sea. Being in nature helps me reset.

You grew up in Naples. What are some of your favorite places there, and in

Rome?

Capri. You can blindfold me, bring me there, and I'll know I'm in Capri. But in Naples, anything along the waterfront is beautiful to me. In Rome, I gravitate toward nature, in the parks and open spaces where I can walk, breathe, and step away from the pace of the city.

Is there a project you are especially passionate about?



From where I sit at a university, I feel a responsibility to making students more educated about environmental issues and providing them with the intellectual tools to understand how to cope and have hope.

For young people, growing up in a world that is getting hotter, with extreme weather events repeating themselves unpredictably, and where the forecasts are catastrophic, is terrifying. Eco-anxiety is a huge problem. A few years ago, a report showed that 60% of 16-25 year-olds in 10 countries reported feeling extremely worked about climate

change, about half of these said that this adversely affected their daily lives, and 75% felt the future is frightening.

If I were young today, I would be scared too.

So, five years ago, I developed a project called Triggering Change, which is a university-wide competition that gets students to create a two-minute pitch on one of two Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) chosen every semester, and to think of a solution that can help trigger positive environmental behavior on that issue. It's been a huge success, and universities from different countries have asked to join. It's also been recognized as a best practice in university-led sustainability education worldwide.

For this project, students research the topic, listen to expert speakers, work in groups, and come up with an idea that "triggers" action and change. I think this helps them understand that we can all come up with small changes to improve the situation, and that a lot of small changes make big things happen. John Cabot students interact with those of other universities, fostering an international exchange of ideas, and making them more empowered.

Besides what I do at work, ***I am passionate about my family and spending quality time together.*** This often involves having a great meal. We spend a lot of time speaking about food, how to cook it, how to eat it – you name it. We also spend a lot of time in nature. My daughter is an expert hiker

MICHELE FAVORITE, *Executive Director of the Center for Graduate Studies and Director of Career Services at John Cabot University.*

and an amazing swimmer, so although I can never keep up with her, I am happy to be part of an expedition and tag along.

What advice would you give to your daughter?

Education is the best investment. Friends and family are your greatest treasures. Sound financial management is the passport to freedom, especially for a woman. And ***life's worth is measured by how much you give back.***



*Written by **Danielle DeVine** | Leadership Writer | Professional Women's Association*