

CPD's Mary Ellen Heiner Honored As Outstanding Staff Of 2021 | CPD Blog

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After 37 years at the CPD, Mary Ellen Heiner has become part of its inner workings. Her style of service can be described as kind, competent, positive, mission focused. And now it's award-winning.

The College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University [named her Outstanding Staff of the Year for 2021](#).

Heiner started as a secretary, but her role has evolved to include the titles of editor, program coordinator, guest blogger and educator—a role she couldn't have predicted at all. "I had never contemplated being a teacher," she said. "When they asked me, I was really nervous, really hesitant to do it, because I didn't know what teaching at the academic level would be like. But it has been wonderful."

She teaches students in the Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Community-Engaged Learning course. "I have learned so much from not only teaching the class, but from the students. ... What I teach comes from personal experience," she said.

So what does it take to be named Outstanding Staff of the year?

"It takes working for a lot of wonderful people," she said.

"I don't even know how you describe Mary Ellen," said Vonda Jump, a former CPD research scientist who is now an assistant professor in social work. "In terms of the competence and her professionalism, her willingness to help people, her ability to see detail and to assist. She's been an incredible mentor to me, personally, all throughout my time at USU, first as a graduate student working at the CPD, and then afterward as a professional."

Heiner has been instrumental in everything from writing budget requirements, coordinating with grant partners, technical assistance, graphic design, creating materials, and so much more. "When we're submitting a grant, Mary Ellen just makes things so easy," Jump said. "And I have to say that I see even more the amazing system that is in place, largely due to Mary Ellen, at the CPD in terms of grant submission. ... It is a well oiled machine."

Heiner's memories of her early days at the CPD are not nearly as smooth, though. "I almost blew it when I started here, because I had no knowledge of computers." Computers were a new thing at the time, and she had barely been introduced to them in college. "I remember the first couple of weeks I worked here I erased documents in the computer that took days and days to create.

"They put me on probation. They were going to give me a one month trial, move me from part time to full time for one month to give me one more chance to prove myself. And then I remember after that end of that month, Dr. [Glendon] Casto, who was the co-director for the CPD, said, 'Take a memo.' And so I put the paper [in the typewriter] to take a memo.

"And he said, 'This memo is to notify you that you have passed your probationary period and we'd like to hire you on full time.'

"That was probably the happiest, most exciting day that I have ever had. And from that moment on, I just continued to grow and to learn and I was never going to be placed in that position again, that my job was in jeopardy because of what I did not know."

From those beginnings she went on to become more than an employee, and that for her, working at the CPD is more than a job. "There aren't a lot of jobs out there that you can say, what you do affects the lives of those who are most vulnerable. ...The work that we do gets down to the bottom of the pile, so to speak. Those who I can really relate to, because I've experienced some of the challenges that they have, and if I'd had some of those resources growing up, who knows what I would be, who I would be? But I know that I have a hand in helping and getting that information out so other people could learn and help other people. I can say that's what I do. That's part of what I am."

Jump said she has noticed: Heiner is all in. "Mary Ellen's ethics are such that when she does her work, she's going to do it well. And then beyond that, it is also a mission. ... It's much more of a calling for her because this is such an important topic and she wants to ensure that our mission is fulfilled."