

Elaine Maimon

President of Governors State University dedicated to making college a reality for everybody

BY JENNIFFER WEIGEL
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Elaine Maimon has always felt at home in a classroom.

"I was the top student at my Philadelphia urban high school and ... got a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania," says Maimon, president of Governors State University in University Park. "Education was very much the motif in my household. There was never any question that I was going to go to college."

Maimon earned her bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees (all in English) from the University of Pennsylvania before starting her career teaching English at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. She continued to teach English at various colleges and universities throughout her career, in addition to holding executive positions at several campuses across the U.S.

Her goals in life, Maimon says, have been "to help students become independent writers and thinkers, (and) to help people see their potential. I think I'm a born mentor."

She joined GSU as its president in 2007. Her focus has been, she said, to "transform Governors State University into a full-service, regional public university." GSU was founded in 1969 as an upper-division school for students finishing their degrees; under Maimon it is becoming a four-year university and will welcome its first freshman class in August.

Maimon and her husband, Mort, live in Crete and have two children, Gillian and Alan.

Following is an edited conversation.

Q: What accomplishments are you most proud of since becoming president at GSU?

A: What we are doing for students is revolutionary in how we want them to feel welcome. Whether they're right out of high school, returning students or veterans, we are investing resources in making sure students get a good start. For the 270 freshmen who are entering this fall, we



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Drawing inspiration

Elaine Maimon gets a pleasure fix by blending fitness with fun: "I'll get up at 5 in the morning to work out and do the rowing machine. That's when I get to watch the shows that I've recorded that I know my husband won't want to watch, like 'Veep' and 'Nashville.'"

are applying 20 years of research that helps freshmen be successful. We're using connectivity, community, block scheduling, smaller classes. Every student takes at least three classes with the same group of students. We have a 30-size maximum for most classes and 15 for freshman composition.

I'm also incredibly proud of our dual-degree program for the students who started in a community college and want to finish a bachelor's degree. Our dual-degree program is a national model now, and it's dedicated to ways that community colleges

and universities can work in partnership. And I'm proud of our commitment within this program to help them graduate without debt.

And then there's our science lab; the official opening is right after Labor Day. When I arrived at GSU, the project had been languishing since the late '90s. I am very proud that we now have state-of-the-art science laboratories.

Q: What was your childhood like in Philadelphia?

A: I grew up in an urban environment, and my mother (Ger-

trude Plaskow) was a widow from the time I was 8 years old. She was just an amazing person. Then I lost her right before starting my freshman year in college. She had cancer. She was only 49. I was the valedictorian of my high school class, and she couldn't come to the graduation, but I was giving my speech repeatedly in the hospital so she could hear my speech.

Q: What did you want to be when you were 13?

A: I wanted to be an actress. And from the time I could pick up a pen, I was writing plays. I was always writing, and I'm a great believer in the power of theater. I always was involved in theater. It's been so valuable for me, and it's one of the reasons I'm so committed to liberal arts education for all students.

Q: What are some of the misconceptions about tuition?

A: For your undergraduate years, you have access to money that you don't have to pay back. People think scholarships are just for athletes or for people with a 4.0 average. There's the (federal) Pell Grant; they just raised the maximum to \$5,700 a year. It's based entirely on financial need. What you do have to do is fill out the form, which is online, and we will help anyone who wants to fill it out. In Illinois, there is also the MAP (Monetary Award Program), which is just for tuition and fees.

Another thing that students and their families don't realize is (that) student debt never goes away. You can declare bankruptcy, and it will not free you from student debt. So apply for those grants and get the money that is available that you don't have to pay back. It's there, and so many people don't know about it.

Q: What do you do for fun?

A: I love to travel. My husband and I went to China a few years ago, and it was transformative. I didn't realize how Eurocentric I was until we were in China. And I'm a voracious reader. Right now I'm reading "The Tiger's Wife," and my son's latest book, called

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"Hits and Misses in the Baseball Draft." I am a tremendous movie buff too.

Q: What's your favorite college-themed movie?

A: I like movies about people who were friends in college and stay friends. I watched "The Big Chill" and "St. Elmo's Fire" recently, and those relationships that you form during your years of higher education are so important for the rest of your life. And we, as educators, have to be conscious of that.

Q: What do you want people to know most about getting a college education?

A: College education is going to be a preparation for your career, not only for a first job. We are in the midst of a knowledge revolution, and never in the history of the world has information been more accessible with the hit of a computer key. But that information could be a big lie. And so you need to hone your ability to assess information and then you need to learn to apply that knowledge to a whole variety of situations, and that is how you develop wisdom.

So for a full life, a successful life, for a responsible life, you need a college education.

Read more of Elaine Maimon's interview at chicago.tribune.com/remarkable.

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