

Quinnipiac's first female SGA president made history at 3M before inviting the world to her art gallery

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Growing up in suburban New Jersey, Deborah Colton '79 didn't have to look far for great role models. She was raised by two of the best in imaginative, inspiring ways.

Her father was the youngest person in state history to be named superintendent of schools when he arrived in East Hanover Township. And her mother, a talented painter and interior designer, created a beautiful home that was often featured in magazines and newspapers.

"My parents were both really smart, wonderful people. I'd like to think I got a lot of those same qualities from them," said Colton, who earned her bachelor's degree in business administration and marketing management from the School of Business.

"And then, when I went to Quinnipiac, I was just a sponge for information. I really, really loved my classes," she added. "There was just something about Quinnipiac that inspired me to excel."

Colton, who was Debbie Magliaro in those days, immersed herself in the whole Quinnipiac experience. She made friends. She studied hard. And she discovered a passion for student government.

After serving as a class representative for three years — building consensus, engaging with issues and growing as a leader — Colton was elected Quinnipiac's first female president of the Student Government Association in 1978. Colton was also elected and served as the Board of Trustees Student Representative for two years.

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"The opportunities I had at Quinnipiac and the people I met there made such a difference in my life," she said. "So many people encouraged me and gave me the confidence to put myself out there. I give Quinnipiac a great deal of credit for the person I am today."

From Paul Falcigno, professor of marketing and the first director of the Quinnipiac Poll, to Grace Levine, professor of communications and an important role model, Colton was both seen and supported in Hamden.

Closing Deals, Opening Doors

After graduation, Colton broke her next glass ceiling. While the sales reps for Burroughs, 3M Company and other business equipment manufacturers were overwhelmingly men, Colton never blinked.

"I basically went into an all-male profession in the early '80s. There were very few women working in sales at that time," Colton said. "But I was confident in my abilities. I saw how what I learned in the classroom could be applied to the real world."

A brief stint with a Burroughs division led to a sales job with a startup in Houston. Before too long, she was beating 3M for the big accounts. It was impossible not to notice Colton and her unprecedented success.

Soonafter, 3M bought out the startup, but Colton kept winning contracts. She was proudly relentless. And then, a year or two later, one conversation changed everything.

"My boss, who was going to leave the company, took me by the side and said, "Debbie — because I was Debbie, back then — you should ask for my position," Colton recalled. "I told him I didn't think I could ask for his position because I was younger than everybody else. And he told me that the national sales manager really liked me and thought I was coming up with a lot of innovative ideas."



The high-performing Colton landed the job and became the first woman to be promoted into sales management at 3M. Over the next three years, she climbed even higher at the company in Houston. But eventually, she returned home to New Jersey with her husband, Bill Colton, a rising executive with Exxon.

Once more, she thrived selling the latest business technology, this time, a state-of-the-art fax machine that could send to 12 locations at once. Wall Street loved it. When she finally left 3M in 1987, Colton ranked in the top 10% of the company's sales force.

"I just thought, this was probably the right time to leave because my husband was doing really well," Colton said. "He was getting all these promotions, so I knew we were going to end up being in all these different places."

Art With a Purpose

The Colton family traveled extensively on assignment for Exxon. They lived two years in Miami, three years in Dallas, then four years in Tokyo and another four in Bangkok, with their two daughters.

"Living overseas gave me the appreciation that people are very similar throughout the world and that we all need to find and focus on the similarities that bond us," Colton said.

Today, Colton is back in Houston. She's a deeply committed benefactor and a renowned art curator and collector. The memories of her mother's canvas paintings and her father's ambition are never far away.

For nearly 25 years, the Deborah Colton Gallery has helped raise more than \$15 million for hundreds of charitable causes, including aid for Thailand after the 2004 tsunami, support for Syrian refugee children in 2016, funding for AIDS research, services for autistic children, relief for victims of the 2005 Pakistan earthquake and many more.

"Giving back is very important to me," Colton said. "When the gallery first opened, I always wanted it to be an arts and culture center for Houston. It wasn't just caring about my own business. It was more about how can I contribute to the community? How can I contribute to the arts and culture of the city?"

Over the years, Colton has sponsored exhibitions with artists from Asia, the Middle East, Russia, Canada, Latin America and Europe. Suddenly, the world feels a little smaller in Houston's West University neighborhood.

"Art is a conduit that often speaks to people's souls and evokes feelings that we all have as humans," Colton said, almost embracing the words. "I have always been driven by bringing people together and trying to help create more understanding of each other."

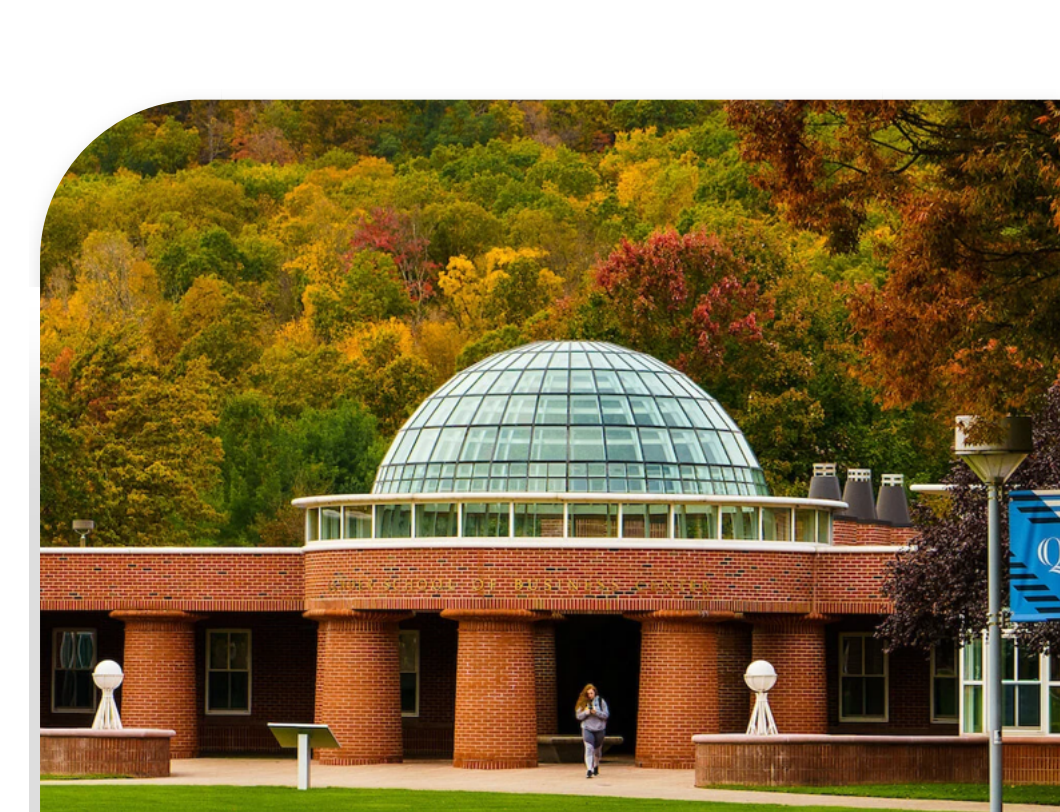
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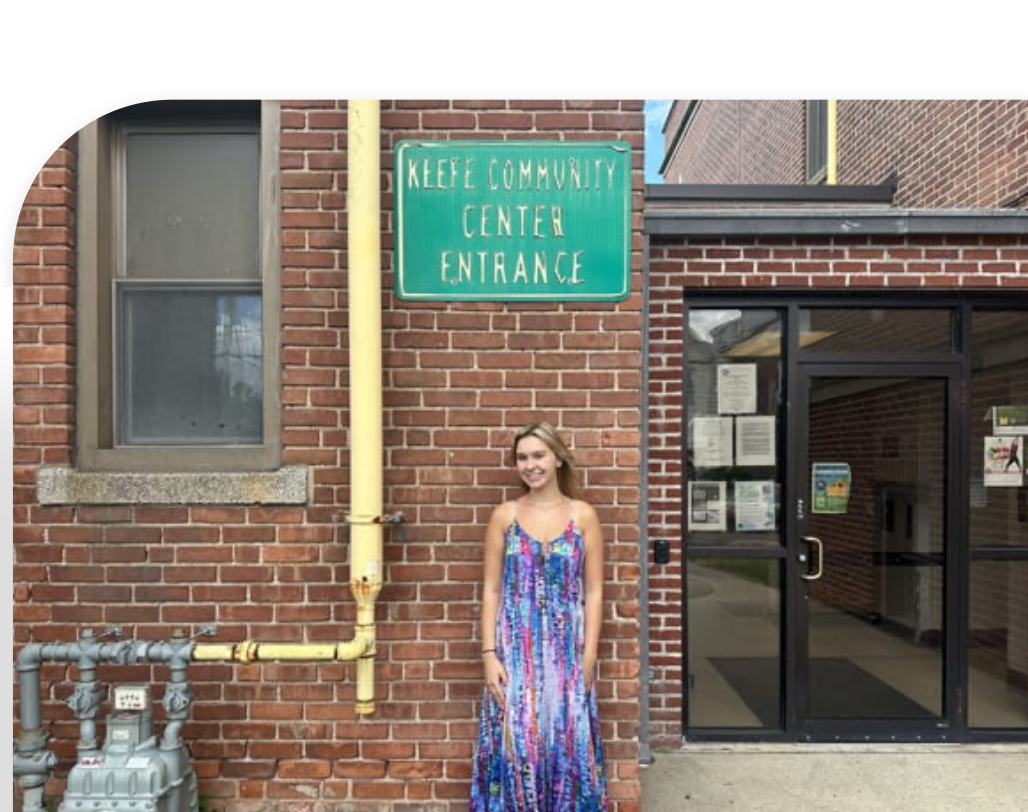
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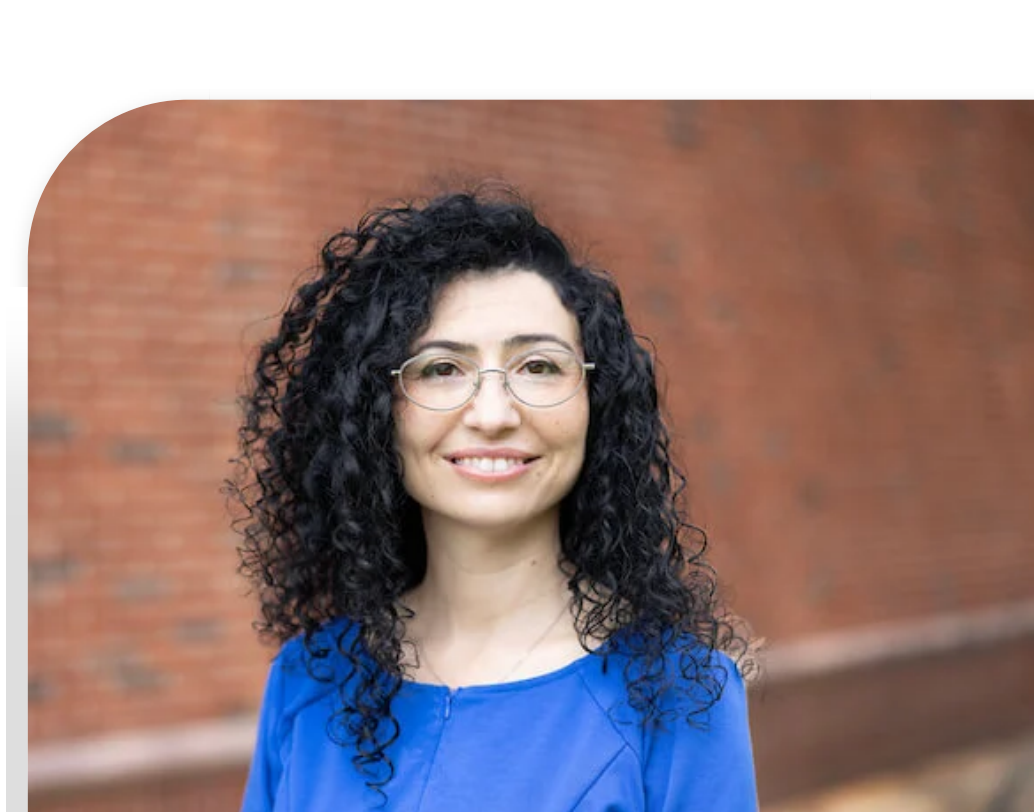
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