

## Focus on Dr. Daisy Cocco De Filippis



President Daisy Cocco De Filippis was born in Santo Domingo. Her parents moved to the United States when she was 13 years old. She served for many years as professor of Spanish and Latin-American Literature at The City University of New York (York College). De Filippis is currently president of Naugatuck Valley Community College—the first Dominican president of a community college in the United States.

President De Filippis holds a Ph.D. in Spanish Language and a M. Phil. in Spanish Literature from the Graduate School and University Center of CUNY, as well as an M.A. in Spanish Literature and a B.A. in Spanish and English Literatures *summa cum laude* from Queens College, CUNY. A published author and literary critic, her scholarly work is recognized internationally as pioneering the field of Dominican women studies and Dominican authors in the U.S.

Prior to coming to NVCC, Dr. De Filippis served as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY). Dr. De Filippis began her career at York College as an adjunct lecturer in 1978, advancing to become a professor of Spanish and ultimately being appointed associate dean for academic affairs.

As president of NVCC, Dr. De Filippis has been honored by the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, the Boys and Girls Club, Habitat for Humanity and the Martin Luther King Jr. Commission. She was also invited to speak at the Waterbury mayoral inauguration in 2012 and named Dominican Mayor of the Day in 2013. She has previously been the recipient of, among many other honors and awards, the Woman of the Year Award from the Association of Dominican-American Supervisors (2006), the Order of Merit, Duarte, Sanchez and Mella in the Rank of Commander, presented by Dr. Leonel Fernandez, President of the Dominican Republic (2005), the *Hija Distinguida of Santo Domingo* (Distinguished Daughter) Award, presented by the Mayor of Santo Domingo (2005), the Educator of the Year Award from Dominican Times Magazine (2004), the Order of Merit Cristóbal Colón, in the Rank of Commander, presented by Hipólito Mejía, President of the Dominican Republic (2003), the Myers Outstanding Book Award, presented by the Gustavus Meyer Center for the Study of Bigotry in North America, to authors of *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Duke University Press, 2001), Simmons College (2002), the Influential Latina Award, *El Diario/La Prensa* (1998), a Citation for Outstanding Contribution to the Community and Academe, Ruth Messinger, President, Borough of Manhattan, New York (1996), and a Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Academe, Claire Shulman, President, Borough of Queens, New York (1994).

Like the best professors, De Filippis begins our interview by directing me to the definitive written resource on the subject at hand, in this case her remarkable essay “The House that Mamá Biela Built,” published in *Telling to Live*. She then proceeds to speak spontaneously, with flowing ease and often poignant honesty, about her early life and intellectual formation.

“My grandmother was a teacher. Born in 1898, she had very emancipated ideas for a woman of her time. She believed that girls could do anything boys could do, and she also believed in me with a passion that nobody else has yet believed in me. My parents were divorced when I was very young, and she taught me to love one of my fundamental loves, the place where I go to find a sense of order and beauty in the world and that is poetry. Poetry defines the manner in which I communicate. I’m not really a poet, although I do write poetry for my granddaughters, because I would like them to remember me in a similar fashion; but I have written many books promoting, translating, and analyzing the poetry of Dominican writers. I learned from her a sense of who I was and what it meant to be Dominican. We used to walk the street to visit women who had been friends of her mother. I was a little girl who actually liked to sit with old people and listen to them tell me stories about how the city was formed, who our family was and what they contributed to that. I would sit in the park and read and make sense of things, I was going through a difficult time since it’s not easy to have your mother remarry when you are four years old. She was my anchor, and through her, I learned to love my island and love my half-island; and through her I learned that there are many traits in my character, resilience and creativity and endurance, that come precisely from what it means to grow up with palm trees that never bend, though they certainly sway, and are not broken by the storm. All of that shaped my view of the world.”

At the Graduate School and University Center of CUNY, De Filippis wrote her doctoral thesis on Dominican poetry: the first dissertation to deal with Dominican literature, it thus became the first of numerous historic milestones she has chiselled out for the community in her career. Due to the boldness of her endeavour, she was advised to present the subject in a European theoretical framework. “I used the theories of Michel Riffaterre. The semiotic study of poetry really looks at the way words relate to one another so that they make meaning. The words need to have a reason to be there, to belong. Semiotics is about organizing. That was the framework, but I got into texts that dealt with a Dominican reality, that brought in the voices of the Dominican countryside. It created a controversy in the Dominican Republic.” De Filippis acquired the reputation of being “a Dominican critic who promotes Dominican works.” In fact, however, her guiding principle was much broader: “I just promised myself I wouldn’t write about anything I didn’t like. That I would just take the time to bring justice to good works.”

With President De Filippis, the conversation flows naturally and easily back and forth between life, literature and language. “My dreams and aspirations have always been very, very high,” she recalls, “because I grew up with a grandmother who introduced me to books as the best way to find meaning in life. In a difficult situation, the best getaway is to enter a book and find yourself in it and find comfort in it and through reading, you understand that there are multiple ways to make meaning in this world and there are different ways of organizing and creating stability, beauty, and knowledge that are not dictated by one culture or by one gender or one people. So I learned very early on, I was bilingual in the Dominican Republic, by the time I was eight or nine I was fluent in Italian, and I learned a lot. My stepfather’s mother came to live with us, and since I gravitated towards old people, I had two grandmothers, one Italian, one Dominican. It shaped my understanding that you could say things in different ways and it would still mean the same thing. You could look at the world, organize the world with different grammatical order, with different words, and the meaning at the heart would still be the same.”

Stories that tug the heartstrings featured prominently in the adolescent De Filippis’s development of her keen eye for patterns of meaning. She likes to say that Charles Dickens picked up where her grandmother left off: “in the sense that *Great Expectations* was the first complete novel that I read in

English, in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. You know Dickens talks about children who are abandoned and disenfranchised but in the end, somehow justice prevails. There's a sense of comfort that things are going to work out. And so I think that first year, being in this country and being away from my grandmother, and the way she taught me, reading took over that role." Later in life, visiting the Dominican Republic for the summer with children of her own, De Filippis had the chance to watch her grandmother giving the same lessons to them. "She would draw a leaf, and she would begin to show me the different parts of the leaf in her drawing, and then we would go to the park— *el Parque de Ramfis*, now called *el Parque de Hostos*. What we try to teach our college students in General Studies, which is how connected things are—I learned that from her, as a kid: that a leaf can nurture a life, can feed it, but also can nurture the spirit if you paint it or if you write a poem about it, if you write a story about a tree. Those lessons I learned from her early on and I brought them here, and then Dickens gave me the sense that I could survive, because junior high school is a really tough environment." De Filippis has since written articles on the subject of the trials and tribulations of junior high students. She notes that she still mourns her grandmother, who died at the age of 86.

Summarizing her revelatory essay, De Filippis tells me that "the conclusion of 'The House that Mamá Biela Built' is that *I am that house*. I am that house that she built, and my survival or my strength and the fact that I can go to New York and now be in Connecticut and have a way to make home and I use the tools to make this home: being who I am, a Dominican mother who is now a grandmother, who is also an administrator and educator but who has also written many books and reads poetry. This campus reads poetry all the time." She mentions that acclaimed Dominican writers Chiqui Vicioso and Marianela Medrano (a close personal friend of long standing) will be visiting soon. Medrano hosts a poetry reading called *Confluencia* four times a year at Naugatuck Valley Community College, a tradition now in its sixth year. The fifth-anniversary milestone was marked by the publication of a book: *Confluencia in the Valley: Five Years of Converging with Words*, with a Foreword by President De Filippis herself.

De Filippis recently stepped down as president of the Dominican Studies Association, a position she had held since the 1990s. "We would get together every couple of years: it was about me disseminating Dominican Studies but also about having the young people that were coming up get to know one another and hear what they have to say and create our own sense of space and history."

What challenges she has faced as the first Dominican community college president? "I think the challenges that I have are about the same as I would have, whether I were Dominican or not. You're really trying to open the doors, to bring people in. This past May, our graduating class was aged 17-71. We have a group of students who are finishing high school and for two years they take some college-level courses and get a certificate in manufacturing, so I had a bunch of 17 year-olds who were graduating from high school who already had a certificate from a community college so that they could begin to look for work." Though the school is predominantly white (60%), De Filippis is proud to say that the current freshman class is 25% Latino (the figure for the entire student body was 14% when she arrived), and that the school is applying Hispanic-Serving status.

As De Filippis tells it, the story of her becoming president of NVCC hinged on a basic, undeniable chemistry, a sense of mutual trust and serendipitous synergy that became apparent in her immediate encounter with the school, with the people who work and study there. "There was an incredible meeting of minds when I came here. I really wasn't planning to come. Somebody nominated me. They wrote to me asking if I would like to be considered and my husband said, 'You can't say no to what hasn't been offered, or to what you have not seen.' He and I drove over here and I saw Waterbury, which has one of the highest poverty rates in Connecticut. And I saw a lot of young men, especially black and Latino men, on the corners. And I thought, 'So, I have a reason for coming to this place.' I came here and the search committee had set up interviews with all the different constituencies in the school from 9:00 in the morning until 5:00 PM, when I finally met the search committee. The students, faculty senate, student senate, different administrators, you name

it. And the message I got at the end of the interviews was: We really want you to come. So by the time I talked to the search committee, I also wanted to come. The challenge I had was this: I came to an environment that was ready for change. I always say, I'm very grateful to those who came before me, because they did some work that I don't have to do."

Although the college sits in a landscape of sweeping storybook grandeur, there were some changes to the space and its use that immediately cried out to be made. De Filippis followed her intuition and common sense. "Having been at CUNY, where it was very difficult to see any green, and having come from an island, here, I'm surrounded by a glacial ridge of trees. What I didn't see, however, what was lacking, was the pulse, the vibrancy, the life, that we had at Hostos Community College, where I had been the Provost for six and a half years and which I loved very much. Here, I had all this beautiful space, but there wasn't a single garden. I walked through the fifth floor that connects all the buildings on campus, but with these beautiful corridors with glass so you see all this wonderful vegetation outside, there wasn't a chair for the students to sit in. Everything was beige. There was a sense that, as Aida Cartagena Portalatin (about whom De Filippis has published a book) would say, a woman was needed here, and I am that woman.

"What it was lacking was a kind of nesting, creating a space and organizing the space. I looked around and I didn't see too many services being offered. I also noticed that the graduation numbers were not high. There were many things like that. So I started by defining the space as a place where student success is our expectation." De Filippis also notes with approval that how to make a good flan has become widespread knowledge at NVCC— thanks to the many flans that she herself has made for her constituents (it is, she says, part of the essence of governing as a Hispanic woman).

Far from imposing an autocratic vision, the dynamic transformation De Filippis has wrought consists in empowering her various constituencies in multiple ways. "I have taken the fifth floor and given people permission to paint the walls." De Filippis found painters and encouraged them to get started changing the look of the place, adding more warmth and color. "We reconfigured one space on the fifth floor and created the Academic Center for Excellence. I envision it as a New York loft with movable pieces, so the students have free tutoring and mentoring that they can go to seven days a week, including at night." The library was reorganized to make it more accessible, more integrated with the heart of the campus.

"We took all the furniture from the core of the building and sent it to the prisons to be reupholstered. We got the students in the arts program to take ownership of the walls and paint them, so we began to create this learning commons, with multiple seating areas for the students." These initiatives inspired the workers in the Admissions, Registrar, and Cashier's Office to come forward with ideas for reorganizing their working spaces "in an orderly way that would make sense for the students," De Filippis tells me. Services were streamlined and consolidated. The staff of the Center for Academic Planning and Student Success also spoke up in turn with ideas for optimal use of their space.

President De Filippis has also worked with local and elected leadership to bring evening bus service to Waterbury, secure funding for an Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center, receive two Fulbright Scholar-In-Residence guests and bring the federal GEAR UP program to Waterbury. NVCC also established a Bridge to College office, which administers \$12 million in grants aimed at preparing students to enter and succeed in college.

With striking clarity of vision, De Filippis repeatedly returns to the connection between these enormous practical and logistical advances made at NVCC under her administration and her lifelong passion for literature. "You see, my writing a doctoral dissertation on the semiotics of Dominican poetry was great because it brought me into the world of Dominican letters. I studied poetry as a

tribute to my grandmother. But then I came here and I said, wait a second! Semiotics is also lean management. Everything is where it's supposed to be, for the purpose that it's supposed to have.

"I arrived here on Bastille Day, July 14, and I remind them of that. The number of graduating students this year was 1,353. So we've more than doubled the number of completions." Under her guidance, student retention has steadily risen, enrollment has increased from 6,128 students (fall 2008) to 7,293 students (fall 2013), and graduation awards have grown from 521 (2007–08) to 1,353 (2013–14) total awards.

"We are the only community college in Connecticut that has had the honor of having more than 1,000 completions in a year. This is the third year in a row. The first year the number was 1,008, then it went up to 1,252, and now it's 1,353. But for the black and Hispanic students, the numbers have more than doubled. It's a 200% improvement in completion. So I'm here for everybody. But because I am here and because I've created an environment where the students all know me as 'President Daisy,' and I spend time and I listen to them, and they all feel that if this sixty-something woman, who's a grandmother, who has an accent, who's an immigrant, can be one of the most effective presidents for a community college—and I'm not bragging, it's a fact, my supervisor tells me that—then they can do anything. So my being a woman, my being Dominican, my being Latina—and I embrace all of my students, I don't care what color they are, because anybody who comes here is mine, I'm their mother, guide and mentor, I'm their defender, but to have the black and Latino kids rise the way they have risen gives me tremendous satisfaction. I am doing what I have done my entire life, which is: I am an educator for everybody; I try to help my people as much as I can."

I ask what her proudest accomplishment as president so far is. "Having created an environment where students believe in themselves and having given the support for them to jump high, to aim high, and achieve, and I'm going by the number of completions, which is spectacular here." In her scholarly work? "Giving voice to the Dominican literature written in the United States in Spanish." Here, again, De Filippis's sense of literature as a dynamic social force is crucial. "I have received as much recognition from the community as I have from the academy. Helping as much as I can to create space, not only at the institutions where I am but in the institutions where I have friends who are academics, for Dominican writers in particular, but not limited to those. You want to maintain the flow of the community. I think I contributed to that." She is also a prolific translator, but mentions that only in passing, as she moves on toward more vital concerns. "As much as time would permit, I have done a lot of work to promote that. I (and many others) have become a vehicle for the country to open itself to its racial makeup, to the role of women, to the need to embrace the Haitian as your brother or sister, because after all, we are Haitians here. Who cares whether I was born on the west or east side of the island? I'm very proud that the women in particular have embraced a very open and inclusive approach. We, from here, have become examples; have become a constant mirror to some of the lesser angels of the island."

The unity of art, scholarship, and life is a truth De Filippis affirms once more as I ask for her advice to young aspiring scholars or administrators. "I never took a course in administration, education, or accounting. I have managed more budgets than I could tell you. The humanities and the arts teach you to think on your feet, teach you to read, teach you to communicate, teach you to be serious, and give you the tools to do anything. The best administrators, in my experience, are those who begin as faculty, who learn what it's like to get through one semester, which bring the experience and can then guide others and become the chair and ultimately, if they have the patience for many meetings, continue to advance. I always tell the women's groups I get invited to speak to that I didn't have a road map; what I kept on with was my spirit open to possibilities. And then, when you go there, whatever it is that you do, the important thing is to believe in it. If you love it, you will do your best. When I began teaching at York College, everybody thought that being an accountant was the way to go. But in the end, you've got to be able to get up in the morning. I love my job. I love what I do. It has meaning for me. I want to do more of it. And I could tell you honestly that since the day I began

working in 1975 when I graduated from Queens College with a bachelor's degree and they made me an adjunct—I taught two courses. And I went to pick up my first check. I laughed all the way home, because I would have paid to stand in front of a classroom and teach.”

As we conclude our conversation, President De Filippis stresses the continuity between her past, whether as a child in the Dominican Republic or as a young teacher at CUNY, her present at Naugatuck Valley, and her future legacy. “Wherever I came, I carry all those people with me. Wherever I am, I’m Dominican. Wherever I am, I will honor that. And wherever I am, I want people to understand that it is a good and beautiful and honorable thing to be Dominican. I have three sons and two beautiful granddaughters, one of whom is nine years old, and she writes poetry. She sent me a poem last week: ‘I am from / burnt caramel flan / and the soft fabric / of my abuela’s shawl.’ My work is done.”

This is one of several profiles featured in the newly launched *Dominican Blue Book* by the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, which this year is celebrating its 20th Anniversary with a grand event, The Dominican Intellectual Legacy Gala, on Saturday, December 6, 2014, at 6:30 p.m. Congratulations to the Dominican Studies Institute on this important anniversary!

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