

HUGUETTE LABELLE HALL

Michel Prévost, University of Ottawa chief archivist

Room 112 of Tabaret Hall is, without a doubt, the most beautiful room at the University of Ottawa. Indeed, this large space, which served many years as a chapel, is unique, with its high, artfully decorated ceiling, its pilasters and its beautiful stained glass windows.

Today, we turn another page in the University's history, as we name the room Huguette Labelle Hall. It's an excellent choice, as Huguette Labelle has always been closely associated with our university, where she received several degrees, as well as an honorary doctorate in 1986. Moreover, for 18 years, Mme Labelle has held the prestigious position of chancellor of the University of Ottawa.

Former chapel

The plans drawn up for Tabaret Hall in 1904 by the American architect A.O. Von Herbulis called for a chapel. However, due to the cost, Tabaret Hall was built in several stages. The plans were finally realized in 1930, when the Wilbrod Wing was completed by Ottawa contractor Henri Dagenais, under the supervision of architects Viau & Venne. The chapel was consecrated December 8, 1931 by Msgr. Guillaume Forbes, then-archbishop of Ottawa and University chancellor. To mark the occasion, the Earl of Bessborough, governor general of Canada, received an honorary doctorate in law.

After the 1965 restructuring, the chapel gradually changed. For example, the Way of the Cross was given to the parish of Saint-Roch-du-Lac-Cayamant in the Outaouais, and the pews were given to St. Margaret's Anglican Church in Vanier. During the 1970s, major work was done, giving the hall its current look. Today it hosts various academic, cultural and social activities.

Chancellor

From 1889, the year of the pontifical charter, to the 1965 restructuring, the prestigious position of chancellor was always given to the Catholic archbishop of Ottawa.

After 1965, the position was open to all.

The chancellor is appointed by the Board of Governors with the concurrence of the Senate and holds office for a renewable four-year term. He or she is the titular head of the University and, as such, holds the place of honour at Convocation and at other important ceremonies. The chancellor is also an ex-officio member of the Senate and, since 1987, an honorary member of the Board of Governors.

The chancellor represents the University at major events, including commemorations, student welcoming activities, award ceremonies, special guest lectures and visits by dignitaries.

It's actually difficult to describe the precise role of the chancellor in University governance. While the chancellor can attend many meetings, he or she rarely does so. Moreover, the chancellor does not replace the president and vice-chancellor. While the chancellor does not make decisions on University matters, he or she can nevertheless play an important role by projecting a positive image of the University and enabling progress on issues by opening doors with governments, business and the community, for example. The chancellor can also offer advice, act as an intermediary and, at times, resolve conflicts. That said, there are no written rules on this, and each chancellor determines the commitment and time he or she wishes to devote to developing the University and raising its profile.

In 1966, Pauline Vanier, wife of then-governor general Georges Vanier, became the first lay chancellor and the first woman to hold the position. Since 1965, six chancellors have served as titular head of the University: Pauline Vanier, Gérald Fauteux (former chief justice of the Supreme Court), Gabrielle Léger (wife of governor general Jules Léger), Maurice Sauvé (husband of governor general Jeanne Sauvé), Gordon Henderson (a businessperson and leading philanthropist) and, since 1994, Huguette Labelle. This distinguished Franco-Ontarian, recipient of several degrees from the University, has held many important positions in the public service and with international organizations. Very active on campus and appreciated by all, Huguette Labelle has been the longest serving chancellor since the restructuring. In fact, very few people know the recent history of our university better than Mme Labelle, who will be replaced soon by Michaëlle Jean, former governor general of Canada and UNESCO special envoy for Haiti.

A Personal Tribute

I'd like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Mme Labelle, whom I've had the chance to spend time with on several occasions over the years. In fact, I've greatly admired our chancellor, who has truly taken her role to heart. Huguette Labelle is deeply attached to her alma mater, and despite her role as chair of CIDA and, later, of the board of Transparency International, she has been a strong presence at the University since 1994. Her kindness and listening skills are appreciated by all. In particular, I would like to mention her interest in the French fact on campus and her great pride in being Franco-Ontarian.

In fact, I've seen Mme Labelle arrive from a long European trip during the day and be at the University's table that evening for an Association canadienne-française de l'Ontario Ottawa event or for the Prescott-Russell Banquet de la francophonie. I've always been amazed by her level of energy. I would also note how easily she establishes a warm connection with people. Many times, she has met with people taking part in my guided tours of the campus. Despite her busy schedule, she has always taken the time to greet my groups with her lovely smile. In fact, I've never heard a negative word spoken about our chancellor — to the contrary, I've only heard good things.

In fact, during her long 18 years of service, Mme Labelle has been our best ambassador. The University will never be able to thank her enough for her outstanding dedication.

While she is leaving, I'm sure that she'll remain one of the most loyal friends of our great university and she will always be welcome in the magnificent hall that will now proudly bear her name.