

20 questions for IU's President

Interview by Elisabeth Andrews Photography by Nino Cocchiarella


McRobbie on McRobbie

Many people are familiar with Michael McRobbie's ambitions as Indiana University's 18th president—his support for information technology, the life sciences, international programs, and shoring up the university's physical infrastructure are among his well-publicized priorities. And, of course, his management of the Kelvin Sampson fiasco has also been big news. But not many of us know much about Michael McRobbie personally—his past, his interests, his family.



There are a number of paradoxes in McRobbie's life. Born and schooled in Australia, he's the first foreign-born president of IU since John Merle Coulter in 1893. (Coulter was born in China of missionary parents.) But having held the position of vice president for academic affairs, as well as professorships in cognitive science, computer science, informatics, and philosophy—not to mention serving as interim provost of the Bloomington campus—he's also undeniably an insider, and only the second IU president to be hired from within the university's ranks.

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A beaming Laurie McRobbie looks on as her husband is anointed the 18th president of IU.

An expert in logic and computer science, the majority of McRobbie's life has been spent in the precisely structured world of information technology. Yet when the workday is over, he enjoys the most unpredictable of art forms: modern art and jazz. Perhaps more surprising is his passion for weight lifting—an activity not usually associated with intellectuals.

A man who routinely avoids the spotlight, McRobbie was both gracious and relaxed as he sat for this interview with *Bloom* writer Elisabeth Andrews in the living room of his Bloomington home.

BLOOM: You're the first IU president in more than a century to come from abroad. What was your childhood like growing up in Queensland, Australia, in the 1950s?

McROBBIE: Australia is a warm country without winters of any significance. I grew up by the seaside. I spent most of my youth in open-air activities—surfing and playing a multitude of sports. I was probably not that different from millions of other Australian kids of my generation.

BLOOM: Surfing, even as a little kid?

McROBBIE: Well, from a relatively early age. One doesn't have to surf on a surfboard—one can body surf, which is what I did every night. I mean, we lived about 200 yards from the beach. It was always fun because I'd get off the school bus in the afternoon and walk up to the end

of the street to have a look at the surf and see whether it was worth going surfing. Then I'd just go home and change. It was a pretty nice lifestyle.

BLOOM: So you started out pretty outdoorsy—do you remember when you first got interested in computers?

McROBBIE: I was part of the Sputnik generation; it was a worldwide phenomenon. I mean, it was just as relevant in Australia as it was in this country. In fact, I remember when I went to high school I benefited from a very substantial investment in science education that was made by the Australian government. So being part of that generation I think it was really a lot "cooler" to be interested in science than, sadly, it is these days.

Computing, of course, was very rudimentary then, but everybody knew that you couldn't do a lot of the moon shots and so on without the use of computers. They played this critical role, so I think in a very general sense I got interested then.

BLOOM: Now that you're a university president, you must find yourself thinking often of your own undergraduate years at the University of Queensland. What was your college experience like?

McROBBIE: I got myself, without really knowing it at the time, a do-it-yourself liberal education. That was not the tradition in Australia—there, it was much more focused

on a series of majors that tended to comprise most of what you studied. But I studied a lot of different things really because I was just interested. I had a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and then I gradually settled down.

BLOOM: How do you think your experience was different from that of your students here in Bloomington?

McROBBIE: In Australia, it's the British system—you are much more specialized as an undergraduate and that's good and bad. I think the bad is that you don't get as broad an education as you do in this country. The good is that you maybe are able to become productive and competent as a professional a little quicker. Those are the tradeoffs.

...with modest talent and hard work you can rise to be president of a great American university. This doesn't happen anywhere else in the world.

BLOOM: Do you find the U.S. and Australia to be markedly different in other ways?

McROBBIE: People ask "Was it difficult moving?" and I always say no, because the U.S. and Australia are pretty similar countries. The people are pretty relaxed, there isn't an ingrained class system, there isn't an aristocracy. I think both countries are meritocracies and this country in particular is a great meritocracy: You rise, by and large, depending on how good you are at doing something, how hard you work, and so on. After I was appointed as president I commented that, to me, this really was the American dream—that with modest talent and hard work you can rise to be president of a great American university. This doesn't happen anywhere else in the world.

BLOOM: When you started focusing on artificial intelligence after you'd finished your doctorate, what was the state of information technology at that time?

McROBBIE: In the very late '70s and early '80s, what was exciting was that all of a sudden computing power was becoming broadly available for researchers to start using and applying for service. It used to be that computers were very rare. They were guarded by this kind of priest-



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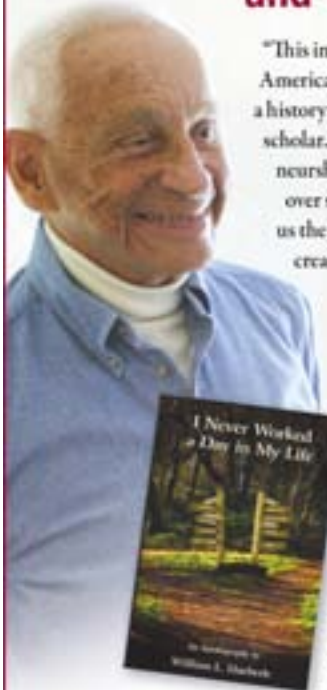


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hood, with one central sort of shrine and very few people could get at them. And all of a sudden it was the beginning of the PC revolution.

This just changed the whole way in which people thought about computers. No longer was computing a scarce good that was absolutely rationed and that you worried if you used one more minute because it would cost you a million dollars or something. All of a sudden it was free, or close to free anyway. I was mainly working with graduate students and we did a lot of work really pushing the limits with what we could do with these different and pretty esoteric areas using the application of computers to solve problems.

BLOOM: When did you think about coming to the U.S.?

McROBBIE: I think as my intellectual interests and my education evolved, I started to understand that this really was the best system of higher education in the world—that the greatest universities in the world were American universities and the finest research being done was at American universities.

One of the reasons I ended up here was that Mike Dunn, who was a professor for Informatics, had come to ANU [Australian National University] where I was studying for my Ph.D. and spent his sabbatical in Australia with my research group. So Mike and I became good friends and we stayed in touch.

My first visit to the U.S., I visited many places and I came through the Midwest, visited Bloomington and spent a couple of days here with Mike. It was terrific. In fact I was here for a Fourth of July parade in 1985. So then I came back again the next year and I was probably in the state every year after that at least once. And in 1996, a number of professors—Mike was one of them—nominated me for an IT position here.

BLOOM: What else do you remember from that first visit to Bloomington in 1985?

McROBBIE: I remember how it was just very peaceful, clearly a very easy place. Peaceful in both senses that it was clearly a small enough city that there were never going to be any issues of personal safety or anything like that, but also peaceful in that it was quiet and not prone to big-city problems of traffic and pollution and so on. I remember the campus back in 1985, just how extraordinarily beautiful it was. At the university I came from, the first buildings were constructed in 1948, and here there are buildings from the previous century and the university's history goes back to 1820. So that all stuck in my mind.

BLOOM: What did you expect to find in the Midwest? Did Bloomington fit with the picture of the American Midwest that was portrayed in Australia?

McROBBIE: I think it's an interesting question. I think, and this I believe is true all over the world, I don't think people really have much of an idea about the Midwest. It is quintessentially American, unlike either coast. You know it's called the heartland rightly so. People think of the Midwest as being insular but I don't think it is. It's just a little more reserved. It's not as flashy and flamboyant as the coasts.

BLOOM: You met your wife Laurie here in Bloomington. How did you get to know each other?

McROBBIE: We both were technologists and we knew each other through our technical backgrounds. Both our spouses, at about the same

time, came down with brain tumors so we used to exchange information about treatments and so on. Then after they died in 2003, one thing led to the other and that is basically the story.

BLOOM: Your family has been compared to the Brady Bunch because you and Laurie have six children between you. Why don't you go ahead and brag a bit about them?

McROBBIE: Oh! We have six wonderful children. Three each: two girls each and one boy each, and they're all wonderful children—very few issues with any of them. The two oldest girls have both graduated, Carol from the University of Michigan, and Josephine from IU. This year we have two graduates, my son Lucien and Laurie's daughter Margaret. They both graduated from [Bloomington High School] South. Lucien is going to IU and Margaret is going to the University of Chicago. We're very proud of both of them. Charlie, Laurie's son, is in what is to be his final year at the University of Michigan in applied chemistry, where he is showing great promise to become a scientist. The youngest, Arabella, will be our last child at home. She will be a senior at South this year, and she wants to go somewhere on the West Coast, so we've already taken her on some college visits and we'll probably do a few more. She's a very good student and she's showing considerable proficiency playing the violin and in the French language.

BLOOM: As you've enjoyed raising your children here, to what extent do you think the opportunity to live in Bloomington is a draw for potential faculty members?

McROBBIE: I think Bloomington plays a possibly even underappreciated role in both attracting and retaining faculty. You can live in peace



The McRobbies were wed on Sunday, August 7, 2005 at Beck Chapel on the IU campus. Between them, they have six children.

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in multiple senses of the word in a community where you know most of the people you see in whatever pastimes you may engage in and with the extraordinary cultural richness that IU brings to the city of Bloomington. It's very seductive. It's a wonderful lifestyle and I think that it plays a very major role in helping to recruit many people.

BLOOM: How do you see the town-and-gown distinction here?

McROBBIE: Oh, I think it's much overrated, in that people seem to think there's a tension between town and gown, and occasionally you see issues come up, but by and large I don't think there are many serious issues. When you go down to the Kroger's, you run into people you know from other organizations who don't work at the university. You see these people on a regular basis and you know they're parents of kids who go to the swim club with your kid. All that stuff breaks down any sort of sense of separation between town and gown. I've seen it much stronger and more problematic than it is here. If anything, I think that by and large the town is very proud of the university and



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Asked for six fascinating people he would like to invite to a dinner party, McRobbie hesitated, saying the question was unfair. But he did name three.

the people who work at the university enjoy the life that they have in Bloomington.

BLOOM: So now we know you shop at Kroger's. You've also been spotted working out at the Iron Pit.

MCROBBIE: Yeah, I like heavy weights. I used to, for a long time, work out extremely religiously to the tune of four nights a week. I was into it very seriously, but it fell away a bit when I started to get very busy around the time I became provost. I'm trying to get it revved back up to where it was but I'm not quite there.

What's interesting is that the way I forced myself to get back into heavy weights on a regular basis was by getting a personal trainer. For years and years and years I could handily motivate myself, but it became an issue, not so much of motivation as just time. But what I found with a personal trainer is that I've got an appointment in the diary and then I normally have to keep it. I use Greg Simmons, who's a great power lifter in Bloomington and a national champion.

BLOOM: You've been able to meet a lot of great people here. Let's say you were planning a dinner party and of all the fascinating people in Bloomington you could invite half a dozen. Who would be on that list?

MCROBBIE: That is a really unfair question! If I thought about that, gee, where would I start? There's such a number of remarkable people here, I wouldn't know how to winnow it down to that six.

I'll try to stay away from too many names, but I remember sitting down and having lunch with David Baker once. I'm a great jazz lover,

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and I had asked a question about Miles Davis, and he started talking about “Oh, yeah, Miles this and Miles that,” and I realized David knew Miles Davis. He played with Miles Davis—the greatest single figure in the history of jazz—and here is a guy at IU, one of our most distinguished professors, who knew this guy intimately! And that’s incredible, and I could have stayed there all day listening to David’s stories.

I think I’d invite people who have had that kind of experience, who have risen to that level of greatness in some discipline. Another person who I think is quite fascinating is Denis Sinor, who really is responsible for our expertise in Central Eurasian Studies. You know, we are one of the leading centers in the world. Denis fought in the French Resistance. A person who fought in the French Resistance is to be admired. Talking to Denis about the history of Central Europe and how he established the center here, you realize he is one of the great intellectual figures in the history of the university.

And obviously Janos Starker, one of the half-dozen greatest cello players in the last fifty years. I’d invite people of that quality.

BLOOM: Are there other notables you have met here who you never thought you’d meet? Where you found yourself thinking, “I can’t believe I’m talking to this person.”

McROBBIE: Oh sure, some of the political figures I’ve met. Lee Hamilton, I can’t say enough about Lee. He was and is an internationally known name, internationally known and respected. I’ve become really good friends with Congressman Hamilton, and he’s one of the truly great figures in the political history of this country. Senator Dick Lugar, who I’ve met many times now over the last couple of years, who I think is another truly great figure. I think meeting the two of them and seeing them on a reasonably regular basis, that’s been something I really never expected.

Some of the industry figures, too. Someone like John Chambers of Cisco, who has played a major role in IT and the IT revolution through the impact of that company. Bill Cook locally, for what Bill has done with his company and the impact it’s had on local industry and industry in the state. His extraordinary generosity is remarkable, too.

I’ve met some international people, too. That’s one of the great things about being here, meeting [Mikhail] Gorbachev when he was here about eight years ago; Lech Walesa when he was here; and Ehud Barak, the previous Israeli prime minister. So, major international figures too, and that’s been very exciting.

BLOOM: As you’ve traveled to the eight different IU campuses, do you feel like you’ve really gotten to know the Hoosier state?

McROBBIE: It’s given me a good idea of what Hoosiers expect of Indiana University, and what they expect is for us to be a great institution. They really do expect us to be excellent, but also, if their sons and daughters are very good students, they expect us to be accessible to their sons and daughters. And all of that has been among my major priorities—to both make us excellent and to make us successful and affordable.

And I think people really want us to be an institution with an international focus and a very cosmopolitan institution as well, and that’s something I’ve tried to emphasize. I think we can thank Herman Wells for the fact that we are that, but I’ve tried to really emphasize that we invigorate that side of what we do.

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BLOOM: Were you surprised, when you came to the U.S., to find out just how big a role athletics plays in higher education?

McROBBIE: I knew about that before I came here, but nevertheless I was still taken aback when I went to my first football game at the IU Memorial Stadium. There are only probably three or four arenas in the whole of Australia that are bigger than that. You realize just what a colossal part athletics plays in the culture of higher education here.

There are lots of issues there, but I do understand that one of the very important roles that athletics plays is to bring young student athletes to develop their athletic skills to a very high level of accomplishment while at the same time getting a first-rate education. And it also provides a marvelous way of keeping alumni engaged in the life of the university, especially if you are doing well. And that, in turn, is what contributes to the extraordinary generosity of alumni to their alma maters in this country, which is a uniquely American phenomenon.

BLOOM: What do you want your legacy to be as the 18th president of Indiana University?

McROBBIE: I would like my legacy to be that I leave this place as an even greater institution than when I found it, one that is known unequivocally for excellence in teaching, education, and research. And also, I think, with a heightened international focus.

And I'd certainly like it to be one where we have addressed many of the major space and facility issues, that we really are able to provide here in Bloomington the facilities that are appropriate for a university of this stature and standard. ✧


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