Linda Burnley Honored with Education Fund at Harvard/M.I.T.

When Linda Burnley traveled to Boston for the 40th anniversary celebration of the National Institutes of Health Medical Scientist Training Program (NIH-MSTP) at the Harvard/M.I.T. MD-PhD Program in November 2014, she expected to reconnect with colleagues and the program's alumni - many of whom she guided and counseled during her nearly 30 years there, most recently as the program's Executive Director. What she wasn't prepared for was the surprise announcement of a new fundraising effort in her name to support the expansion of the program, which trains physician-scientists: the Linda Burnley Fund for MD-PhD Education at Harvard and M.I.T.

"You've spent more years than anyone making this program what it is," Loren Walensky, the program's director, told Ms. Burnley in front of more than 300 alumni, students, faculty, staff, and guests who attended the event. "When we thought about whom to rally this effort around, only one name came up over and over again — and it was yours."

"I was in shock, and surprised that I didn't have a hint about this in advance from anyone! I'm still speechless!" says Ms. Burnley. She retired from Harvard to become Associate Dean of the Gerstner Sloan Kettering Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSK) in July 2011, and is now also Director of the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs. Alumni of the Harvard/M.I.T. MD-PhD Program are being encouraged to donate to the Linda Burnley Fund, which will enable the program to expand and promote educational programming and community-building events for its students.

Over an average of eight years, trainees in the Harvard/M.I.T. MD-PhD Program pursue both the MD and PhD degrees. The program was formally only nine years old when Ms. Burnley was hired as its first full-time administrator. In the years to follow, along with managing the NIH-MSTP grant and finances of the program, she helped guide and shape it to create seminars, establish its first newsletter and website, bring in outside faculty for lectures, organize annual student/faculty retreats, and develop other programs to nurture and support students.

"It gave me a tremendous opportunity to learn about the commitment it took for recent college graduates to pursue combined degree training, transitioning between medical school and graduate school and then starting their post-graduate careers," she explains. The oldest of five children and a self-described "problem solver by nature," Ms. Burnley worked closely with the trainees to help them address unique challenges in combining medical and graduate school, figure out solutions, and improve and expand the program to make it what it is today.

That role wasn't a far cry from the earliest days of her career. With a Bachelor of Science in urban studies and criminal justice from Georgia State University, Ms. Burnley served as a juvenile volunteer probation officer in Atlanta, counseling her clients about how to find effective solutions to their problems and follow a better life path. The local court recognized her with a Volunteer of the Year Award. She moved to Massachusetts to work with the court system there and helped implement and teach new probation standards before starting her career at Harvard.

As Associate Dean of GSK, she works closely with Kenneth J. Marians, the school's Dean, to oversee its operations, direct the school's strategic planning, manage admissions and student affairs, and ensure that students are achieving their goals and requirements. "Linda is avidly involved in almost every aspect of my graduate school experience, such as recommending academic conferences, providing guidance about career planning, and referring me to science writing workshops," says graduate student Lei Wei. "She loves and cares for the students. In her eyes, no problem is too trivial."

"With her consummate knowledge of graduate training, Linda has strong empathy for the concerns of and stresses on students during their training. Her tremendous good will and energy fit seamlessly into the GSK culture," adds Dr. Marians. "She provides outstanding leadership on all

Vist the Harvard/ M.I.T. MD-PhD Program website to learn more about the fund.
As Director of the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, she leads a team dedicated to enhancing the academic, collegial, and professional environment for postdoctoral trainees at MSK. "Meeting with Linda leaves you with a new sense of optimism about your work and confidence in yourself," says Moriah Heller Nissan, a postdoctoral researcher in the laboratory of David Solit. "She goes out of her way to make you feel included. Stumble into the graduate office during a birthday celebration for one of the staff members, and you will find yourself with a piece of cake in your hand before you know it!"

As GSK approaches its tenth anniversary in 2016, Ms. Burnley and her colleagues are continuing to look for ways to raise the profile of the school and working on renewal of its accreditation. "Linda has been a tremendous asset to GSK as the program has matured and become more widely recognized nationally and internationally," says Thomas J. Kelly, a former Director of the Sloan Kettering Institute (SKI) and an investigator in SKI's Molecular Biology Program. "In addition to her superb management skills, her humanity and her warm personal style have enriched the GSK experience for students and faculty alike."

"As we get ready to celebrate our first decade as a degree-granting graduate school, we know we have to be aware of what students are looking for and what they need to succeed in a changing research environment," adds Joan Massagué, SKI Director. "With Linda's experience, intuition, and commitment — plus the extraordinary connections she's able to forge with our students — I am confident that GSK will continue to grow and flourish."

"I'm excited to work at MSK, a world-class academic institution," concludes Ms. Burnley. "I've been challenged and inspired by my work with students, faculty, staff, and leadership, and have been happy to use my past experience to make a difference here."