

REMARKABLE WOMAN

Anne Marie Murphy, breast cancer task force director

Executive director of Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force pushes for health care equality

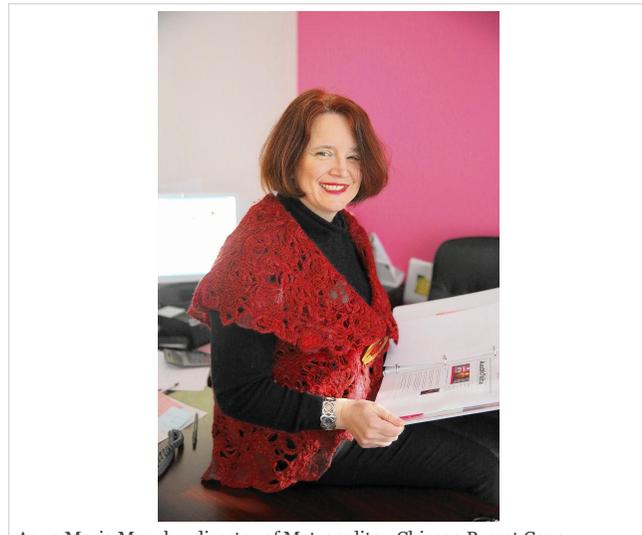
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After Anne Marie Murphy came to the United States from her native Ireland to earn her doctorate in [molecular genetics](#) from Johns Hopkins University, she planned to "become an academician," she said.

Volunteering at a [clinic](#) for domestic abuse victims altered her course. "I got the 'save the world' bug," said Murphy, 48. "So, much to my parents'



Anne Marie Murphy, director of Metropolitan Chicago Breast Canc...

consternation, I moved to Washington, D.C., and got a job on the Hill."

After working for Sen. Ted Kennedy in Washington, then Sens. Paul Simon and Dick Durbin in Illinois, Murphy joined the Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force. In 2010, she became its executive director.

"Tenacity, impeccable organizational skills and a terrific sense of humor" enable Murphy to run the task force, said Dr. David Ansell, president of its board and chief medical officer of Rush University [Medical Center](#) in Chicago, in an email. "Her (experience has) given her a unique perspective on the disparity (in women's [health care](#)) and what we need to do to fix it."

Already, the 5-year-old task force and Murphy have received a string of awards, including a 2014 Healthy Chicago Award from the city for the organization, and a 2014 Impact Award from the Chicago Foundation for Women for Murphy.

She lives with daughters Isabella, 6, and Rose, 2, and their au pair in an Oak Park house she describes as "arts and crafts and Fisher-Price." Her hectic schedule is a far cry from the Dublin of her childhood, "when moms were home, and the kettle was on every day at 4 o'clock," she said.

But life is "grand," said the upbeat Murphy, as she juggles her roles as single mom and nonprofit director.

Following is an edited conversation.

Q: What persuaded you to leave your political career for the Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force?

A: The task force's mission, which is reducing the inequality in women's [health](#) care and cancer death rates. Many women have no health care or poor care because of their race, type of insurance, income or where they live. That's not fair.

Q: How do you change this?

A: Through programs like our Beyond October, we offer free mammograms for uninsured and underinsured women. Through our consortium, we improve the quality of mammograms and breast cancer treatment. We fund studies that show the disparities. We work with legislators to change laws. And we educate women about the importance of breast cancer screening and early treatment. When women say they're afraid to get mammograms because they've heard they hurt, we tell them waxing or getting a tattoo is *way* more painful.

Q: You say the disparities are growing. Why?

A: When the state cuts funding for breast cancer screening, it disproportionately affects women of color. I'm especially concerned about the quality of care for Medicaid [patients](#), and now more and more women qualify for Medicaid (because of expansions of the Illinois FamilyCare program and Obamacare).

Not every mammogram site is the same. There may not be a radiologist on-site who specializes in breast cancer. You may get a screening mammogram but not a diagnostic one. You may not be able to get a same-day read. If you

have to come back a second time, you might not be able to get time off work or you might be afraid.

Q: Is your work ever done?

A: When every woman in the Chicago area has an equal opportunity to fight breast cancer, our work is done. We can't help every woman, but we do make a difference.

I'm pragmatic. In politics and nonprofits, everything doesn't get done, but we can aspire to do it all. Just like being a single parent, you make trade-offs every day. I can't be at the school meeting and at work and with the kids.

Q: Who funds the task force?

A: Sources include corporations, individuals, the state, the National Institutes of Health, national foundations such as Susan G. Komen for the Cure and Avon Foundation for Women and local foundations.

Q: What is the most frustrating part of the job?

A: Fundraising is a full-time job in itself, in addition to running the task force full time.

Q: Your advice to young women just starting their careers?

A: Don't live your life based on other people's expectations. At the end of life, men say they regret working too much, but women regret doing what other people wanted them to do. We're raised to do what our parents, our husbands, even what the neighbors tell us to do.

Also, don't get wedded to one field. It's OK to go in a different direction. I did. Take your skills, add new ones and find new opportunities. You don't know you don't like another field if you haven't tried it!

Instead, we should do what makes us proud and gives us joy.

Q: What do you read for fun?

A: For light reading, I like Daphne du Maurier novels. In "Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World" by Tracy Kidder, Farmer inspires me with his conviction and achievements. When I don't want to read, I watch "Downton Abbey." That's my candy.

Q: How do you unwind?

A: I cook Irish soda bread or try recipes from Rachel Allen's cookbooks. She's Irish too. I attend Ireland Network Chicago events, which include other "off-the-airplane Irish."

Q: What keeps you going?

A: I'm motivated by my goal, which is to be able to look back at my life and feel that I helped in some small way to make things fairer, helped those who needed help and fought the good fight for equity.

Learn more about the Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force at its website, ***chicagobreastcancer.org***.

Drawing inspiration

Anne Marie Murphy says her Monday night "stitch-and-bitch" knitting group helps keeps her sane. "Knitting is my zen," she says, adding with a laugh, "My bumper sticker says 'I knit so I don't kill.'"