TERRIE M. WILLIAMS

UCSC's Denton carried additional burden on her shoulders

By Terrie M. Williams

Today, University of California-Santa Cruz faculty will be attending a memorial service for Chancellor Denice Denton. Her tragic death has sent a shock wave through our campus, but perhaps no more so than through the female scientist community. From all outward signs she had been one of the ones to make it. A meteoric rise through the ranks of bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees at MIT followed immediately by professor, dean and chancellor -- all accomplished in less than 50 years.

By virtue of her accomplishments and her personal focus, she promoted diversity in the workplace. She was supposed to be our mentor, our leader showing us how a female scientist could move from the lab, past the "ceiling" and into the power of the upper academic echelon. She had arrived at UC-Santa Cruz on the heels of Chancellor M.R.C. Greenwood, who had escalated with equal speed into the offices of the UC president. Today, University of California-Santa Cruz faculty will be attending a memorial service for Chancellor Denice Denton. Her tragic death has sent a shock wave through our campus, but perhaps no more so than through the female scientist community. From all outward signs she had been one of the ones to make it. A meteoric rise through the ranks of bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees at MIT followed immediately by professor, dean and chancellor -- all accomplished in less than 50 years.

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And at these levels there are no guidelines for women. How does one transition from the veiled geekiness of the scientific lab to the blinding exposure of the public eye? For men entering the male bastion of upper academia, the transition is made with a Brooks Brothers suit and a strong handshake. For women, the transition is a slippery balancing act on a schizophrenic tightrope of thread. Take on the requisite male persona and dog runs sparked investigations. Bay Area newspapers listed UCSC protests, and property and personal attacks that warranted the hiring of bodyguards among the bucolic dog runs sparked investigations. Bay Area newspapers listed UCSC protests, and property and personal attacks that warranted the hiring of bodyguards among the bucolic redwoods of the Santa Cruz Mountains. In the end, Greenwood resigned and Denton retreated into herself. Their accomplishments evaporated with their disappearances.

In recent years, both had asked me to join them in the "upper ranks" of women dedicated to making a difference at a higher academic level. Although ego urged me forward, the view from their heights was not appealing. Positive strides were always overshadowed by controversy. The media intimated abuse by and toward these chancellors. Seemingly exorbitant salaries, partner compensation, home renovations and dog runs sparked investigations. Bay Area newspapers listed UCSC protests, and property and personal attacks that warranted the hiring of bodyguards among the bucolic redwoods of the Santa Cruz Mountains. In the end, Greenwood resigned and Denton retreated into herself. Their accomplishments evaporated with their disappearances.

Ironically, abuse is nothing new to scientists. There is a constant stream of criticism from journal editors, granting agencies and colleagues that is inherent in the peer review process. Both of these women had weathered the process; both were tough. But this was different; at these upper academic levels, as with politics, the abuse was personal.

Ultimately, Chancellors Greenwood and Denton had to conduct business in a man's world. They negotiated for salaries, partner compensation and perks as any businessman would have done. They tried to create a dedicated, like-thinking team to move their academic goals forward -- sometimes team members were men, sometimes they were hand-selected from the tiny pool of qualified women in upper academic ranks. Criticism was swift and unrelenting. Did the chancellors go too far in their efforts, or had they simply gone too far as females? A businessman would tell you "it is not what you are worth but what you can negotiate," and approve their tactics. An overworked, underpaid staff worker might think otherwise.

In the end, I wonder if Denice D. Denton simply possessed the one fatal female flaw, cultured from childhood and promoted by society that caused her to end her life. She wanted people to like her. The problem was as Chancellor Denton she was never allowed to show us that side.

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