Let Denton's legacy be an end to wounds from glass ceilings

By M.R.C. Greenwood and Anne Peterson

On June 24, the University of California and her community of friends experienced one of the most painful, unimaginable of tragedies -- the horrible and public suicide of one of the nation's most prominent scientists and supporters of women's rights in science, Denice Denton.

Denice Denton was a woman of courage, integrity and quality. She was a national and international leader for women and, in particular, for women scientists. She was a role model for girls and young women and an inspiration to many aspiring scientists. She did not hesitate to "speak truth" or to spend time counseling and encouraging colleagues beginning their careers. She had very high professional standards and did not believe that diversity was the enemy of quality. She demonstrated that everywhere she served.

She pioneered new ways to help faculty search committees ensure that they were fairly treating qualified candidates and took pleasure in the successes of those who were selected and promoted. For these accomplishments and more, she had just been awarded the prestigious national Maria Mitchell award. Her colleagues admired and respected her and at times wished we had her passion and strength while slogging through the detritus of the entrenched "old boys" networks that continue to permeate the highest levels of academe.

This was a woman who made unconventional choices from an early age and was not afraid to defend herself and surmount adversity. Denice was also an excellent engineer. She succeeded in gaining a doctorate in engineering when very few women felt comfortable or wanted in the field -- which they were often actively discouraged from entering -- and she earned tenure in her field at a time when it was frequently reported that women had to pass a "higher standard" to overcome this crucial career hurdle. Like some other women before her, she was often the "first" female to be in a position and encountered difficulties and skepticism.

Denice was also gay and took the courageous step when beginning her tenure at UC-Santa Cruz to make that clear. In San Francisco and Santa Cruz -- both locales apartments in San Francisco, but we can be sure that rampant speculation will follow. We will never know what led her to that fateful moment on the roof of the Paramount building in San Francisco. We are left only with her reputation and with trying to decide what role leadership was the cause. Others may claim that it was all personally motivated. It doesn't really matter. In the end, we have lost a colleague who was badly treated both by the institution that hired her and by the seemingly insatiable appetites of the media.

Denice was also gay and took the courageous step when beginning her tenure at UC-Santa Cruz to make that clear. In San Francisco and Santa Cruz -- both locales where gay rights have seen widespread support -- her honesty was sadly often met with hostility and even threats. She deserved better, and met this unexpected response with dignity but sadness.

We will never know what led her to that fateful moment on the roof of the Paramount apartments in San Francisco, but we can be sure that rampant speculation will follow. Some will try to deny that the harsh male-dominated environment faced by many female leaders at the highest levels of academic and corporate America contributed to her ultimate decision. Some will speculate that the lack of support she received from the UC leadership was the cause. Others may claim that it was all personally motivated. It doesn't really matter. In the end, we have lost a colleague who was badly treated both by the institution that hired her and by the seemingly insatiable appetites of the media.

Perhaps the most plausible speculation is that those who break through the glass ceiling may be wounded -- even destroyed -- by the shards.

What can we do to make the path easier for young women in science? The National Academies of Sciences will soon release a report on "maximizing the potential of women in academic science and engineering." Denice was a member of this committee and the report will be dedicated to her memory. The best possible way to commemorate Denice would be to take this report seriously, and insist that its recommendations are implemented with the same enthusiasm that has embraced the "Rising above the Gathering Storm" report on national competitiveness. is former deputy director of the National Science Foundation and was senior vice president of the Kellogg Foundation. They wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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