

Vicki Bier: Gerda Lerner is a professor emerita of History at the University of Wisconsin, a past president of the Organization of American Historians, and a leading scholar on Women's History in particular, and was also both a close friend and mentor of Denice throughout her years at Madison and beyond. So go ahead and get started. There should be table mics, if you'd just sit down. Unless you prefer to stand.

Gerda Lerner: No, that's fine. Okay, can I be heard?

Audience: Yes.

Gerda Lerner: Okay. Well Donna is a hard act to follow. And I just want to remind, her story reminded me of an incident that happened when she was hired here. Because Donna, as all presidents have to have a home department, and her home department was political science, but she chose to make her home department Women's Studies. And what happened was, I was told by somebody in Bascom she came a few months early to see the campus, and she said, "well, let me go to Women's Studies." And there was great excitement because nobody knew where Women's Studies was. That was the time when Women's Studies was off-campus in a little house so small that we could never have a meeting without everybody sitting on the floor. I'm very glad that Donna mentioned some of the names of the people who were responsible for starting Women's Studies here because the Women's Studies department also started with a very dramatic public protest – I mean, they had started making claims that they wanted Women's Studies and that wasn't very happily received – and one of the issues at the time was that the swimming pool was closed to women all day. It was open only between six and seven p.m., which everyone knows is a wonderful time for women to go swimming. And the reason given was that the men were swimming in the nude, and they couldn't possibly have women in the pool. And that situation actually existed – it's hard to believe. And Ruth Bleier organized a nude swimming at the pool. And this did it. This started Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin.

So my theme is, very simply, I want to tell about my relationship with Denice, which was very early, which is why I'm the first speaker here. Because Denice appeared at my door one day. I didn't know her. She knocked at my door, and she said, "You don't know me. I'm an engineer. And I hear that you're a person on campus who fights for women and gets somewhere. And I need help, and I'd like you to be my mentor." That's how she came into my door. And I said, "Look, that's very nice and very flattering. I know nothing about science, I have no contact with the science department, maybe you should get somebody else." You know, tried to talk her out of it. But it didn't work. And in fact, that was our relationship. And this was very early. She was here. She didn't get half the major incidents that were going to happen later. And I think what I want to stress is that the Denice I knew then was a young, very talented, very ambitious, very energetic assistant professor who really didn't know how the

university functioned. She didn't know how you win these battles or how you even enter them. And like all women and all minorities that have been in this position, and still continue in many areas to be in that position of being alone, the only one, the first one, what happens is that the person internalizes it. It's not big, dramatic things that happen – we remember the big, dramatic moments, you know, she was locked out of the lab, we remember that – but it's the daily insults, the daily humiliations, the lack of a climate that treats you like a human being. And I know I could sit here for an hour and tell you about my life in this regard because I've been in this position all along, starting a field that everybody said didn't exist – there was no such thing as the history of women, so what was I doing trying to insist that we have to teach it at undergraduate level. I mean – ridiculous.

So, the absence of positive support was really what made it so hard, and what happens is that when you have that kind of constant negative feedback – we know that from research literature – students who have negative feedback and negative expectations perform bad. And it took extraordinarily talented people to win the battles. And what I think I want to stress is that a lot of the extraordinarily talented people were also worn out by it. And Denice came close to being worn out by it very early on, and I think she went through this gradual process of learning how to fight. And only when she won little victories did she become strong enough to go on to the next one. And you all know the incident about how she was locked out of the lab – this took months. And my advice to her at that point was, at first, was to show her that the institution has rules. And if you want to change the institution, the first thing you have to do is go through the rules, and then go on further. And she was very impatient with that. She thought I was conservative, you know. So when this incident with the locked out of the lab came, she went through the steps and it led her nowhere. She got nowhere. And we have heard President Wiley and Donna speak about how they intervened. Well, first of all, Denice didn't know that they intervened. It would have meant a lot, had she known. It seems to me that she had support – this is the first I've heard about it. But then when Denice made the decision, she came to me one day, and she said, "You know, I've gone through all the steps, it's getting me nowhere, I'm going public." And I had to say to her, "Well, you're going to pay a price for that. The institution does not like you to go public with their dirty secrets." And she said, "Okay, I'll have to." But she said later about this, it's very interesting, after she got the lab back, she said, "You have to give the system credit in responding, but the bottom line is that it wasn't until I went outside of the college that something happened – that's the bottom line." And she learned that. From that moment on she said, "From now on, anything happens, I go public with it." And so step by step – you know.

Now, another, she had this horrendous tenure struggle, which, of course, is so typical of what women in pioneering positions go through. And the general, I mean, I have seen so many women nationally go through these tenure struggles, and even the strongest internalize it. For a while they think, "Well maybe I'm not good enough. Maybe I haven't done this." Well Denice applied for early

tenure in 1991. At that time she had five outstanding teaching awards, two of them national awards. She was nationally recognized as a young professional investigator. She had secured a \$100,000 research grant, and she was denied tenure, okay. It's inconceivable how this can happen. But it happened, and it has happened before. And she took this very, very badly. This was really bad for her. And in the middle of it she got this wonderful appointment at ETH in Switzerland, which is an enormous honor – it's the outstanding scientific research institute. And I thought, and we talked about it, I said, "Well now they're going to change their minds about tenure." Well the response in the department was, "You can't take leave now when you're in the tenure process." And one of the senior professors pretended like he'd never heard of ETH. "What is this place?" you know. And it's this kind of thing that undermines the self-confidence, it undermines the courage of even the strongest women. She did get tenure finally in 1992 on the second round. But I, myself, went through the same process at Sarah Lawrence College when I was hired as a tenured professor, and they don't hire tenured professors. So they told me I was going to get automatic advanced tenure a year later. I had published three books at that time. Three books. And I had one under contract. And they denied me tenure. So I know what that is. It didn't undermine my self-confidence totally, but it certainly made me extremely angry. And then when I got tenure, I got a letter from the president that was so insulting that I picked up the phone and I said, "Unless I get a different letter, I'm refusing tenure and I'm leaving." This is how I got tenure. It's, you know, it's grim.

The final irony – ironic incident – in her struggle here, was that of course you know that she applied for the National Science Education Institute grant. It was based on the work she had done already. It was based on her ideas. She had a long national reputation on working on these education projects. And she was competing with three places, or two other places, rather: Harvard and Stanford. No, three – and UC-Berkeley. And she got the grant. Now, in order to get such a grant, the university has to sign on, and the chairs of the relevant departments have to give their signature to the grant. And I remember very vividly the very sarcastic comments that Denice made when she had to go from one of these men to the other who had been harassing her and treating her badly all those years and denied her tenure and whatever, and she got the signatures. Well, when the grant was announced – and it was a \$10 million grant – when the grant was announced it was published in the local newspaper, and that's how I first saw it. I picked up the paper, and there's this picture of six men, all department chairs, and underneath it said "UW gets grant." And Denice wasn't mentioned! This is what a harassing climate looks like. She hit the ceiling then, and I don't know whether that was the defining moment that decided her to leave, but it was just the last straw. But it was a very insulting thing. And of course after that they were all looking for photo opportunities with her – all these chairs – and they're saying how they had always been very close to her.

I want to close just simply with saying that, first of all I want to say that you may find this very hard to believe – I found it very hard to give this small talk because I have even, after all my life and career and all the many honors and recognitions I have received, I have never talked about the difficulties. And I love this university, and I felt, “well how can I get up there and say all of these bad things that happened?” Well, they have to be said. We have to recognize the cost of the pioneers, but we also have to recognize that it is the small things, it’s the climate, the way in which we treat women as human beings that makes the difference. And finally, and there I would be saying I have a different position than Donna. I am not concerned with the leaders, with the outstanding excellent superior women who finally made their way in their excellent superior universities. We will not have won equity until the most mediocre woman, like the most mediocre man, has a right to make a living. And we used to have a saying in the early days among all the pioneering women of my generation: “You’ve got to be twice as good as the best man in your department in order to get your foot in the door. Fortunately that’s not very difficult.”

[Laughter and applause]