

Remembering Denice Denton

Blog :: If It Hadnt Been For Denice

"If it hadn't been for Denice..." Stories



(1979)



(2003)

Denice Dee Denton

(1959-2006)

"If it hadn't been for Denice..."

This blog is offered as a place where anyone who knew and worked with Denice can post their own "If it hadn't been for Denice..." story, in order to enable those of us who contribute (as well as others who may read the blog) to understand the range and type of impact she had on people across the nation.

Mary Dee Wenniger — 18 August 2006, 13:11

I never met Denice, although we were both in Madison in overlapping years, she as an engineering professor at the University of Wisconsin and me as a writer and founding editor of "Women in Higher Education," a national subscription newsletter. She was a subscriber and wrote us a letter thanking us for sending her a free copy of our book "Gender Equity or Bust!" in May 2005, shortly after becoming chancellor of UC Santa Cruz,

Since her passing, I have learned of her passionate, energetic advocacy for women in the sciences, engineering and leadership, and the creation of many programs to support them. Plus her wacky sense of humor and propensity to "draw outside the lines, run with scissors and speak out of turn," according to her family.

The article on the editor's page of the August 2006 issue is entitled "What Can We Learn from the Life of Denice Denton?" It is currently available on the home page at www.wihe.com and later in the Web site archives.

Barbara Anderegg — 01 August 2006, 18:54

I first met Denice when Soren Bisgaard asked her to give a presentation at an NSF-sponsored workshop we were giving. She graciously agreed to give the talk for us, even though she was very busy. Shortly after that, I heard her speak about the National Institute for Science Education project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, specifically about retaining women in engineering. I still remember being utterly and completely impressed with the project and to this day it is the definitive retention program for me. Denice was also funny, joking about fitting yet more into her schedule in her "copious free time." After that, my colleagues at Madison Area Technical College and I watched her career in awe as she moved to the University of Washington and then to Santa Cruz. We loved her intelligence, her humor, her strong and unerring voice for women in engineering and underrepresented groups everywhere. I'm sure she never knew what an impact she had on me and my colleagues, but she was an absolute standout and role model for us.

Jean Bahr, University of Wisconsin — 01 August 2006, 10:51

I met Denice at a reception at the Women's Studies Center in the fall of 1987 when we were both beginning our tenure track appointments at Madison. There were only a handful of women faculty in the physical sciences, and Denice was the ONLY woman faculty member in the College of Engineering. Someone suggested that the women in physical sciences and engineering should try to get together periodically for mutual support. If my memory is correct, Denice hosted the first evening with wine and cheese at her house, compiled a list on contacts and recruited others to host subsequent gatherings. If it hadn't been for Denice, the tenure track would have been a much lonelier experience for me and other women who joined the Madison faculty in the late 80s.

Vicki Bier, University of Wisconsin — 01 August 2006, 10:19

Many of us have greatly missed Denice as she has moved on--first moving from the places where we got to know her (Madison, Seattle, etc.), and then with her death. It now falls to us to do for ourselves, and for others, all of the things that she did for us in our own lives. My own short version of that list includes:

Inspiring us to be more fearless, and not be held back by self-doubt

Believing that we could do anything we wanted--that no goal or project was too big if it was worthwhile

Making sure to have as much fun as possible while doing the work

Creating a sense of community--especially by reaching out to new people

Rich Felder, Hoechst Celanese Professor Emeritus of Chemical Engineering, N.C. State

Created by George Toye, Consulting Professor at Stanford's Center for Design Research

University — 27 July 2006, 09:35

I met Denice when we both presented at a workshop for new faculty and graduate students at Stanford. I've never forgotten a piece of advice she gave in her presentation. One of the new faculty members said that he had a lot of ideas for how his department could improve, and he asked whether as the new kid on the block he should contribute those ideas or hold back. Denice's suggestion was that he should "lie in the weeds like an anthropologist, and observe." She explained that he would quickly identify the people he should be listening to--the ones who clearly got the attention and respect of their colleagues whenever they spoke. She added that he would also spot the "village idiot," whose contributions were met with eye rolling and staring out the window, and he would do well not to rely too much on that individual's advice. It was wonderful counsel--I could have saved myself a lot of grief early in my career if someone had given it to me, and I have passed it on to participants in many workshops I have given since then. It pains me to think that from now on when I repeat it I'll have to attribute it to the late Denice Denton--besides mourning her, I mourn the great wisdom and humor that we all would have continued to benefit from if she had not left us.

Ed Lazowska, Bill & Melinda Gates Chair in Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington — 26 July 2006, 21:55

I knew Denice before she was recruited to the University of Washington ten years ago. We had met and become friends at several national meetings on engineering and engineering education. What first attracted me to Denice was that she was smart, she was articulate, and she had her head screwed on right. After her arrival at the University of Washington – where I was Computer Science & Engineering department chair during her first five years as Dean – I quickly learned that she also possessed enormous measures of vision, courage, integrity, and backbone.

Those were difficult times at the University of Washington. We had an upper administration that had totally lost touch with the faculty and the academic leadership: a president who was an empty suit, and a provost who had trouble keeping his word. Denice's courage, integrity, and backbone were instrumental to surviving that period -- in the specific case of the program that I led at the time, Denice was instrumental in getting construction launched on a new building for us (for which we were raising the bulk of the funding), and in getting our budget made whole (following some flim-flam from on high that I won't discuss here).

If it hadn't been for Denice, UW Computer Science & Engineering would have been substantially weakened during that period; instead, we were substantially strengthened. Shockingly, to naive little me, Denice was one of a very small number of UW deans who were willing to lay it on the line during that period. Many others were happy to commiserate, but not willing to stand up and be counted.

Denice knew what was right, and she acted accordingly, without concern for the personal consequences. I wish there were more like her; the world would be a better place.

Ilene Busch-Vishniac — 26 July 2006, 15:41

Denice was the first female engineering dean at a major, research-intensive university. I was the second and would not have been able to assume this role had it not been for Denice. We overlapped as graduate students at MIT and throughout our professional careers, becoming friends while she was at U Wisconsin and I was at U Texas. Denice was recruiting me to U Washington at the point I was offered the deanship at Johns Hopkins, and we had a nice chance to chat about the advantages and disadvantages of each. She convinced me to give the deanship a whirl and then made sure I understood that I could rely on her for guidance and that I should feel a responsibility to help other women follow us.

Denice was a fixture in my years as dean and later. She was the titular leader of the women who became engineering deans and always welcomed newcomers and made herself available for advice. Over the years, I came to enjoy Denice's strong sense of self, incredible mind, and calm grace under fire. I appreciated that she brought an unusual intensity and clarity to problems that most interested her – promoting diversity and changing teaching to improve student learning. Several of the best practices and programs in these two areas are the direct result of Denice Denton's ideas. Yet, as others have noted already, Denice also managed to preserve her humanity and have a rich life beyond her professional activities. It is my purely social interactions with Denice that I remember most. They are the source of my best and funniest stories about Denice, especially those related to shopping for clothes.

Denice never missed a teaching moment. She taught students, faculty, deans, staff, ... simply everyone. It is my hope that this will be her greatest legacy - that she will be remembered as a master teacher, a person of great integrity, and an individual full of joy and hope.

Winslow Sargeant — 26 July 2006, 11:50

Denice Denton was a wonderful person! She had a profound impact on my career beginning when I

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sat for the Ph.D. qualifying exam at UW-Madison. This was a stressful time for me but Denice was a supportive voice. As one of the few African-Americans in the ECE program, I could count on Denice as one who truly embraced diversity in the science and engineering professions.

Denice was instrumental once again when she stepped in to serve as my co-advisor. My first advisor had taken a position at an east coast university. He remained my advisor but wanted me to travel back and forth from Madison to the east coast before he would consider discussing my research and Thesis. This was not desirable. It would have put a tremendous economic burden on me. A new advisor not familiar with my research would have delayed my Ph.D. completion date. I discussed this situation with Denice and she quickly came up with a solution. She proposed becoming my co-advisor so I wouldn't have to travel from Madison. She also would shepherd me through the Ph.D. defense process.

I will always be grateful to Denice for her support. We have lost a great person who had the tremendous ability to relate to people on many different levels. She continues to serve as a great role model and will continue to positively impact many lives.

Barbara Waugh, Ph.D., Hewlett Packard — 26 July 2006, 10:17

Denice Denton and Gretchen Kalonji shared a profound commitment to the world, far beyond the narrow relationship-focused commitment of many high profile couples. They challenge all of us who have experienced discrimination and harrassment in any way to transform the pain into deeper sensitivity and bolder commitment to the struggles of others in our own country and around the world. They modeled not only taking a stand, but with brilliance and political savvy, digging in to wrestle with colleagues, institutions and organizations for sustainable change. They pioneered multi-sector - government, university and industry - state, national and global change initiatives, even as they touched and continue to touch individual lives. If it hadn't been for Denice and Gretchen...because of Denice and Gretchen, my own imagination about what my own partner and I can do in and for the world is immeasurably richer.

Terry Millar — 25 July 2006, 21:26

Denice Denton had a significant impact on my life and career. Susan Millar enumerated some of the impacts that are also important for me – I will list others.

If it had not been for Denice, then as Susan Millar noted there would have been no National Institute for Science Education, and that probably would have meant that there would have been no NSF GK-12 KTI or NSF MSP SCALE at UW-Madison. And thus if it had not been for Denice a number of the significant advances that UW-Madison has helped make in math and science education and equity would not have happened.

If it had not been for Denice, then as Susan Millar noted there would have been no LEAD Center at UW-Madison, and that would have meant that there probably would have been no connection of the UW-Madison Graduate School with Rice University's Professor Richard Tapia. And thus if it had not been for Denice, there would have been no successful Graduate Engineering Research Scholars (GERS) program at UW-Madison with the corresponding significant increase in minority participation and Ph.D. graduation from the UW-Madison College of Engineering.

Without Denice, my sense of humor would have been different. The last fifteen years without using variations of "Get a grip..." in different contexts would have been less rich.

Without Denice, my story repertoire would have been more limited. The larger than life tales that involve Denice inspire imagination and effort in our academic world.

Susan Millar - July 25, 2006, 22:26 — 25 July 2006, 20:29

I begin my tribute to Denice by pointing to a few ways she changed my professional life, and end with words about ways she changed my life as a whole.

If it wasn't for Denice, I would never have been able to launch the Learning through Evaluation, Adaptation and Dissemination (LEAD) Center at UW-Madison. In 1993, I was a fledging academic staff researcher at Penn State, trying to figure out a way to get meaningfully employed at UW-Madison. Denice was a young Professor of Engineering at UW-Madison. Without having met in person, we agreed early that year to work together, entirely by email and phone, on an engineering education proposal, "Manufacturing Engineering Education for the Future," to the NSF. Our plan was that she would be the implementer for this project, and I would be the evaluator. I was amazed at her savvy and efficient approach to proposal writing. When we met later that spring, we hatched the idea of a UW-Madison LEAD Center: it would provide a way for her to communicate to academic colleagues her belief that evaluation is important in moving engineering education forward, and a way for me to create myself a position in Madison. Denice then not only helped me understand that I needed to pitch this idea to the chancellor, but also helped me design and produce the center planning document, and accompanied me to my meeting with

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chancellor to make sure that he understood that this plan had serious faculty backing. Others helped me as well, but Denice believed in me, gave me her time and insight, and helped me at every step of the way.

If it wasn't for Denice, the LEAD Center wouldn't have had that first major project, Manufacturing Engineering Education for the Future, which helped launch this fledgling center's reputation with chemistry, math, and engineering faculty.

If it wasn't for Denice, the UW-Madison likely would not have submitted an NSF proposal for the National Institute for Science Education, which was funded for \$10M from 1995 to 2000. Denice played a critical role arranging for the initial meeting between social science and education folks, on the one hand, and science and engineering folks, on the other. She then orchestrated the grant writing process for a bunch of people who were not used to working together. When the proposal was funded, she helped set the collegial cross-disciplinary tone of this project.

If it wasn't for Denice, I would not have understood so well or so quickly how science and engineering faculty can learn from and immediately apply evaluation feedback to improve their courses.

If it wasn't for Denice, I would have expected less of myself. I would not have understood so soon that sometimes you have to simply ignore the fact that your status is lower than others around a decision-making table, and get your voice in the mix. I would be living with less gusto. I would have less understanding of the courage it takes to keep going in spite of obstacles, both those we understand and those we merely sense and cannot grasp.

If it wasn't for Denice, I would be less aware that people who push the edge of what is possible need care and support beyond what they know how to, or feel entitled, to ask for.

To honor Denice's many gifts to me, and my memories of her, I redouble my commitment to pick up where she left off and keep her vision moving forward, with compassion for all on this path.

Cindy Atman — 23 July 2006, 22:11

Denice's influence on my life is profound and wide ranging. Denice took a real chance when she recruited me to start the Center for Engineering Learning and Teaching (CELT) at the University of Washington in 1998. I was a newly promoted Associate Professor with engineering education research as my area of scholarship – an anomaly at that time – and I had little experience managing people. No matter to Denice. She saw an energetic person willing to take risks to improve engineering student learning – and placed a bet (backed with real resources) that I would succeed. She gave me lots of guidance at first – and then stepped back – allowing me to make my own mistakes. And wow – did I make some whopper mistakes. No matter to Denice. Her response “Well, what did you learn?” It is now time for me to reflect on what I learned from Denice. That list is long.

What did I learn from Denice?

I learned to be bold and stand up for what I believe in.

I learned to follow my heart and do work that I believe is important.

I learned that listening is sometimes the most important part of talking with someone.

I learned that all voices are important and everyone deserves a place at the table.

I learned that it takes perception and judgment to know when to push, and when to let things ride.

I learned to try new foods.

I learned to sing loudly and take walks on the beach when I need to.

My pledge to her is that I'll keep these lessons in my life and my heart, day by day.

Sheri Sheppard — 16 July 2006, 12:57

Without Denice, I would not know as much about style. Denice showed me that style is not just how we wear our hair or clothes. Style is the way we project ourselves and interact with the world. It is as personalized and individual as a fingerprint. I observed the way that she would spend time with students late into the night, listening to them with her head slightly cocked. She would encourage them by sharing stories about tough times in her life that she worked through. She would help them smile at themselves and make them feel that they could reach their goals. So what does this have to do with style? Well, Denice has been one of my few female colleagues over the last 20 years. Though we have both devoted major portions of our careers to making engineering more accessible, we have done it with different styles. We all don't have to have the same style. How we choose to work in the world, our style, is as personal as what we choose to work on.

From Denice I learned another lesson about style. Our style is what the world sees of us. It is a cover. It is not to be confused with who we are—what we feel, what we dream, what we fear, what we struggle with. I want to look beyond peoples' styles.