

UCSC Chancellor Denise Denton Dies in Apparent Suicide

by Mary Bryant and Michael Thomas

For Dr. Denise Denton, there were a lot of firsts. In 1996, she was the first woman to be appointed as Dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Washington and the first woman to hold such a position at an NRC-designated research institution. In 2005, she was the first openly lesbian educator and youngest person to be appointed as a University of California chancellor.

However, a lifetime of accomplishment, honor and accolades apparently did not provide a safety net for depression. On Saturday, June 26, she committed suicide by leaping from a San Francisco high rise. News of the event stunned the UCSC community.

While the San Francisco Coroner's Office is still conducting an investigation, many believe Dr. Denton took her life after two difficult years at the helm of a rapidly growing university campus, in part because of the resulting job pressures. Reportedly, police said that Dr. Denton's mother, Carolyn Mabee, was in the high rise apartment at the time of her daughter's death and told officers that her daughter had been "very depressed."

The apartment was owned by Denton's partner Gretchen Kalonji, who was out of state at the time of Denton's suicide. With Denton, Kalonji moved to the Bay Area from the University of Washington in 2005. A noted scientist, Kalonji was hired as UC's director of international strategy development, an appointment that along with other controversy made for a stormy tenure for Denton at UCSC.

As UCSC chancellor, Dr. Denton, 46, managed a campus of 10 colleges for 15,000 students. As the Chancellor,

she was the County's largest employer. She persistently faced union tension during her time at UCSC.

According to UCSC spokeswoman Elizabeth Irwin, Denton had been on medical leave

for middle school girls to promote opportunities for women in math and engineering," said Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Diane Siri. "I was inspired by her as a role model. ... She made it a prior-

Irwin returned immediately to Santa Cruz to help manage communications for the University and "to help in any other way I could."

Irwin said that Denton's family was in Santa Cruz

cellor's residence. The group blocked Denton's vehicle from leaving the property, insisting that she watch a short play about racism.

Campus officials say the protestors went so far as to rock her car back and forth. However, as in many cases, it was difficult to tell if Denton was shaken emotionally by that sort of aggressive activism, which is not uncommon in the UCSC community.

"The Chancellor is kind of the lightning rod. There were perhaps a lot of surprises or challenges here that she didn't expect," noted Earth Sciences Professor Gary Griggs, who also directs UCSC's Institute of Marine Sciences.

Denton had cause to be concerned for her safety at times. In one incident, a metal road marker stand of considerable weight was hauled from a parking lot to the private side of Denton's residence on campus and thrown through a bedroom window in the middle of the night. Irwin said that had someone been in the room, that person would certainly have been injured.

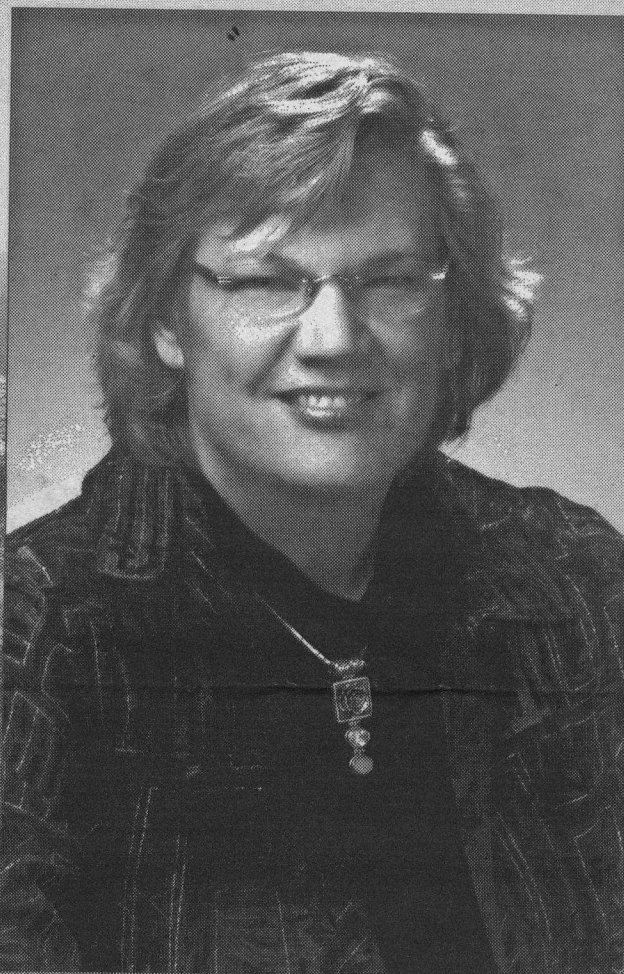
Reportedly, frustrated protestors frequently banged on her door demanding to be heard on controversial issues.

Rumors spread on campus that Denton had requested the installation of security cameras in the hallways outside her office, and that she had hired 24-hour security. However, Irwin said that Denton hadn't requested or hired a security guard and no security detail was assigned to her.

Still, some colleagues describe a Chancellor who was considerably more private than her predecessor, former chancellor MRC Greenwood. Others, like Eason, said that Denton was easy to approach, and talked about Denton recently playing a long game of cha-

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Chancellor
Dr. Denise Denton
1959-2006

since June 15. Despite having planned to attend several of the University's 10 commencement ceremonies, Dr. Denton was absent and sent her apologies for missing the graduations, saying she was ill. Irwin would not discuss the nature of the illness.

Denton was expected to return to UCSC on June 26, and had several events scheduled in the next few weeks, including the opening of an engineering academy for middle school girls studying math and science.

"I worked with Dr. Denton to start a brand new program

ity to listen and then she made things happen."

Coast Commercial Bank President Sandy Eason met Denton last year.

"She was a phenomenal lady and a dear friend," Eason said.

Eason and Denton had recently formed a professional women's group. Eason said that she wouldn't have believed that Denton would have ever contemplated suicide.

Irwin was in Nevada with her husband on Saturday when she received the news.

"I was shocked and deeply grieved," she said.

from Texas and plans for a memorial service would be announced shortly.

Many Challenges for Denton

Throughout Denton's short tenure at UCSC, she appeared to struggle with a series of controversies. The challenges began with the creation of a position for her partner, Gretchen Kalonji, at \$192,000 a year in the UC system, and continued up until her final weeks at the University.

In an incident on June 7, a group of about 60 protestors demanding higher pay for custodians staked out the Chan-

rades with a group of women friends.

Trouble from the Beginning

In 2004, former Chancellor Greenwood was promoted to Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs for the entire UC system, a stepping stone to the UC presidency. In February 2005, Denton was hired to fill Greenwood's post at UCSC.

A few months later, instead of a ceremony officially naming her chancellor, Denton requested an investiture and organized a symposium on diversity to coincide with the event. However, the day before the investiture ceremony, in a fast-breaking controversy, Greenwood resigned after she was criticized for hiring a friend and former UCSC colleague to a position at the UC Regent's office in Oakland. The daily news ran the story on Greenwood, deciding not to cover the investiture ceremony.

"I was personally disappointed. ... No recognition was ever given to the event," Irwin said.

According to some who knew Denton, the shock of that day, and the slant of previous and ensuing media coverage, may never have worn off.

"[The negative publicity] got to her more than people realized," Eason said, declining to elaborate.

Dr. Siri said that the media's constant buffeting made Denton's job more difficult.

"If the focus is on the trivial and the negative, it is going to be impossible to make the kinds of improvements and changes we need in the system," she said.

According to everyone interviewed, Denton had clear objectives to encourage diversity in education, especially for women, and ideas about how to broaden the impact of University work on difficult worldwide concerns.

Among the criticisms was a \$600,000 remodel of the Chancellor's residence that

occurred during painful contract negotiations with University employees. An enclosure for Denton's dogs reportedly also cost the University upwards of \$30,000. Denton was not directly involved in contracting the project, had wanted to construct the run at her own expense and eventually paid taxes on the \$30,000 cost. Nevertheless, she bore the brunt of outrage over the expense.

The Good and the Bad

While there were many controversies, the story of the \$30,000 dog run followed Denton for her nearly two-year tenure, being repeated often in ongoing reports about UC hiring controversies and union protests, joined with other criticisms.

In April of 2005, Denton found herself without the backing of some colleagues following one of the campus' most difficult conflicts in recent years.

Students staged a Tent University sit-in demanding the democratization of University procedures, but the location of the protest was deemed unsafe and students' intention to stay overnight violated a no-camping policy. Denton ordered campus police and UC Berkeley campus police to disperse the protestors.

The officers used "pain compliance" techniques to dispel the protestors, photos of which fueled campus outrage in the ensuing weeks. Following the campus Senate's Executive Committee report, a letter signed by 230 faculty members expressed "our deepest distress at the decision to call in the police," a decision they concluded was "unwarranted and seriously endangered the safety of the students."

However, in between the fiery debates, Denton got much done. For instance, this summer some 33 middle-school girls will attend an academy "to look at careers they might not consider otherwise." The academy was Denton's

brainchild and an offshoot of the Monterey Bay Educational consortium. According to Siri, "[The concept was] based loosely on a school Dr. Denton worked with in Washington."

Dr. Siri said that the problem of accessing careers in math and science for young women had been a constant challenge.

"This was the problem we talked about for many years," Dr. Siri added.

Denton gave the project space on campus and local philanthropist Jack Baskin donated the funding. Siri said that a project of this scope would have typically taken a couple of years to develop. With Denton's enthusiasm, the project was launched in six months.

Siri added that Denton's ambition was for the academy to turn into a full-time charter school at the University for science-bound young women.

Lonely at the Top

As the University of California's first openly lesbian Chancellor, Denton was hailed as a role model during a time when gay and lesbian issues claimed the national spotlight. She is widely credited with her work in support of equal opportunities for minorities, women and gays and lesbians, particularly in scientific fields of inquiry. Her public sparring with former Harvard President Lawrence Summers over his comments on women in science will not soon be forgotten.

Yet the Chancellor's role also demands the cultivation of rapport and a supportive network, and Denton apparently grew close to a select group on campus, according to some.

"Coming in from the outside, she had an agenda that she put out there about diversity, but I think she was really still finding her way around in terms of the campus and the community," Griggs noted. "There were signs that there was a lot of stress."

Amid the controversy was a plan to expand the campus

that drew heated debate from civic leaders and no-growth advocates.

However, regardless of the public challenges, her apparent suicide came as a shock to both the University and the greater community.

"I was as stunned as everybody," Santa Cruz Mayor Cynthia Matthews said of hearing the news. "My main impression was real sadness that someone so talented felt that desperate."

Many believe that Denton faced one of her greatest challenges in building support for the University's ambitious growth plans, with the Santa Cruz City Council exploring new strategies to fight the plan in recent weeks.

"In terms of dealing with the City, she was still finding her way and that reflected the change in status from being a dean to being a Chancellor," Matthews said.

But Matthews added that the Council continued to meet with Denton and was working towards improved communication.

"Obviously, there were some really different interests at play," she said. "But it seemed in recent meetings that she was more open to hearing the City's concerns and trying to find a more cooperative relationship."

Students Lose a Leader

Amelia Timbers, a politically active student who interacted with Denton on some key issues, said her suicide sent shockwaves through the community.

"Most of my friends, even the ones that didn't know her, are in shock," Timbers said.

On Monday, June 12, Denton hosted a dinner at her residence for Timbers and about 30 other participants from an undergraduate internship program.

"She chatted with us about our future plans," said Timbers, who graduated the following week.

At that dinner, just two weeks before her death, there were few signs of the deep

depression that Denton's mother reported to San Francisco officials.

"She was extremely comfortable with students," Timbers said.

She also recalled watching Denton deftly handle a crowd of frustrated University neighbors at a meeting Denton had voluntarily organized to address expansion concerns.

"The intimation that it was just professional pressure just doesn't hold up," Timbers said, echoing the comments of others in the UCSC community. "She was an extremely private person. I don't think any of us knew her private life."

Without a statement from Denton's family or the San Francisco Medical Examiner, many are left guessing. Reportedly, Denton was a cancer survivor and other rumors are circulating about ongoing health issues.

However, most will agree that Denton did not get a fair shake at a difficult job. Bank president Eason said that it appeared that Denton was unduly criticized.

"This is an opportunity to look in the mirror," Eason said.

While Eason believes that Denton took the condemnation to heart, she doesn't believe that much of the anger was directed personally at Denton.

Dr. Siri said that the community may want to consider a closer look at its relationship with the UCSC chancellor.

"I think there is a question as to what kind of support it takes for a leader to come in and promote change," Siri said.

And given the tenacious reputation UCSC has gained in recent years and the struggles UC regents are facing in defining proper compensation of university leaders, replacing Denton anytime soon may be troublesome.

"[Personally] the loss is sad," said Siri. "Professionally her credibility and success as a woman in a field that has been primarily dominated by men will be difficult to equal." ■