

Depression darkened educator's last days

Bio-D
UC CHANCELLOR LEFT HOSPITAL, KILLED SELF

By Mary Anne Ostrom
Mercury News

Former University of California-Santa Cruz Chancellor Denice Denton was suffering from severe depression and had just left a psychiatric hospital when she took her life in a 33-story plunge from the top of a San Francisco high-rise, according to a medical examiner's report released Friday.

Her June 24 death, ruled a suicide, was caused by injuries sustained in the fall from the rooftop deck of the luxury Paramount apartments, where her longtime partner lived.

Less than 24 hours earlier, Denton had been discharged from UC-San Francisco's Langlely Porter Psychiatric Hospital, where she had spent nearly a week, according to the report. She had been prescribed the antidepressant Zoloft and sleeping aid Ambien. An autopsy found antidepressants in her system.

Denton's death stunned the academic world last June, a tragic end to a once-promising career.

When she arrived at UC-Santa Cruz in 2005, she was a rising star, but she quickly became embroiled in controversies that left her frightened and uncertain how to deal with the fallout. By June, she had withdrawn from campus life.

Friends had said that in the weeks before her death, Denton, 46, had been under extreme stress and had

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KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

UC-Santa Cruz Chancellor Denice Denton was severely depressed when she killed herself June 24, according to a report.



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Denice Denton's longtime partner, Gretchen Kalonji, spoke fondly of her at a memorial service June 29. Denton's suicide stunned the academic world, a tragic end to a once-promising career.

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taken a medical leave on the advice of her doctor. Few, however, knew she had been hospitalized.

The medical examiner's report suggests Denton spent her last few hours in deep despair.

Investigators said her mother, Carolyn Mabee, told them Denton was "acting completely irrationally" after leaving the hospital and thought the police had been chasing her. She also told them her daughter "had been suffering from depression and was under severe stress related directly from her job and her personal relationship with her partner," the report said.

Mabee and other family members could not be reached for comment Friday. Citing privacy issues, UC officials refused to comment on Denton's medical history or say when they learned of her illness. She had taken a medical leave nine days before her death.

"There is no question that the job of a chancellor, as with other executive-level positions, can be very stressful," the UC public affairs office wrote in an e-mail.

Denton's longtime partner, Gretchen Kalonji, did not respond to phone calls or e-mails. Kalonji was traveling when Denton died. She serves as UC's systemwide director of international strategy development, a job she got when Denton became chancellor in early 2005.

According to the medical examiner's report, Denton sought help at the UCSF facility early in the week of June 18. Mabee told investigators that when she went to pick up her daughter from the hospital, Denton insisted on driving her all over San



Online Extra

Log on to www.mercurynews.com/news to read and sign a guest book in memory of Denice Denton.

Francisco, but would not say why.

They finally arrived at Kalonji's apartment about 2 a.m. June 24. But Denton said she did not want to be there, got her purse, and after some discussion ran off down the hall toward a stairway. Mabee spent several hours looking for her, the report said.

A guest at the nearby Argent Hotel called police shortly after 8 a.m. to report a body on a parking garage across the street.

Carol Tomlinson-Keasey, Denton's friend and former chancellor of UC-Merced, said Friday that she had spoken to Denton and Kalonji more than a dozen times in the week before the suicide, and neither indicated there were problems in their relationship.

She said she believed Denton's depression may have intensified partly as a result of treatment for a thyroid condition.

Denton had a history of thyroid problems stemming from removal of a cancerous thyroid in her 20s. Most patients with thyroid cancer are cured, and even those who cannot be cured may live a long time and feel well despite their cancer.

The medical examiner's toxicology report is inconclusive on whether she was taking thyroid medicine at the time of her death.

When Denton arrived at UC-Santa Cruz in 2005, she was a forceful personality who had been dean of engineering at the University of Washington, with engineer-

ing degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

She immediately ran into a storm of criticism.

First it was disclosed that her partner had been given a newly created \$192,000 job as part of Denton's hiring package. The university defended the move as normal academic practice.

Denton drew fire for authorizing the arrest of student protesters who had put up a "Tent University" to protest fee increases and workers' low pay. Someone threw a parking barricade through a window of her home. Sarcastic newspaper articles and cartoons targeted everything from her sexual orientation to the clothes she wore and her social skills.

And just before she requested a medical leave, more than 100 students barricaded her car when she tried to leave the university parking lot, insisting that she watch a skit.

Liz Irwin, a UC-Santa Cruz representative, said in an e-mail that the campus is still trying to "understand this terrible loss" and is "intent on moving past the tragic circumstances of her death."

Ray Austin, student body chair, said Friday that students and faculty are planning a forum with clinical psychologists early next year to examine death and depression in an effort to educate the campus community.

"We're not going to focus on her, but we will talk about the important topic," he said.

"A lot of students and faculty want to remember her in a good light, how powerful and strong a woman she was."

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