

DENICE DENTON | 1959-2006

# A FEELING OF 'SIEGE'

## Confidants thought chancellor's spirits were improving

UCSC Faculty  
By Julia Prodis Sulek

Mercury News

A few days before UC-Santa Cruz Chancellor Denice Denton plunged to her death, she spent a day walking through the streets of San Francisco, talking to a friend on her cell phone.

The June day in the city was unseasonably sunny.

"It's wonderful to have air blowing in my face," the top UCSC leader told her confidant. "I'm trying to clear my head and think through some things."

The past few weeks on campus — the swirling controversies, the frightening student protest — had been overwhelming. She told University of California President Robert Dynes that her physician recommended a medical leave. She needed less than two weeks and promised to return last Monday.

"I knew she was under extreme stress because of inci-



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

Denice Denton posed for a photo the week before starting her new job as chancellor of the University of California-Santa Cruz.

dents both on the campus and in the media," Dynes told the Mercury News last week.

Sixteen months ago, when Denton started as chancellor,

she seemed like a perfect fit. If any community would welcome this openly gay academic who overcame discrimination from her earliest days in a

small Texas town, who became nationally renowned for her commitment to women in science and social justice, surely it would be the progressive seaside town of Santa Cruz.

Instead, she told friends, "I'm under constant siege."

She arrived at the university already trailed by controversy and, during her short tenure, endured unrelenting attacks. In the first week of June alone, just before she left, student protesters barricaded her car and a political cartoon in a local weekly paper depicted her with stubble on her chin.

"It wasn't any single story or any single cartoon, but it was a continuing, rolling, unending set of stories and set of cartoons; it was the continuing everyday assault," said Carol Tomlinson-Keasey, the chancellor of UC-Merced, who talked to Denton on the phone

See **DENTON**, Page 19A



# DENTON | Chancellor felt under siege

Continued from Page 1A

that breezy day in San Francisco — and kept in frequent contact with Denton in her final weeks.

"She was under a great deal of stress," Tomlinson-Keasey said. "I felt she was troubled. I felt she needed some time away. I never felt she was going to kill herself."

## Iconic role

When a new chancellor arrives in Santa Cruz, the community very nearly holds its breath. In this city of 55,000, the chancellor carries more prestige than the mayor or state legislators. Some of Denton's predecessors at the 41-year-old institution had earned iconic status in town. The most recent, M.R.C. Greenwood, was considered by many to be brilliant, accomplished, and charismatic. Many credit Greenwood with retaining the university's reputation in liberal arts while also earning it a name as a powerful research institution, "the UC of Silicon Valley."

Denton, 46, had all the credentials of a promising successor.

"She drew outside the lines, ran with scissors, spoke out of turn," her sister, Derrie Denton, said during Thursday's memorial on campus.

She earned several engineering degrees in the 1980s from the male-dominated Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1987, she was hired as an assistant engineering professor at the University of Wisconsin, where she became known as a fighter for standing up to one of the department's most powerful professors, who had locked her out of their shared lab.

"She was a very forceful personality, sort of like a hurricane," said Vicki Bier, an engineering colleague at the University of Wisconsin. "She knew what she wanted and figured out how to get what she wanted."

She was named engineering dean at the University of Washington in Seattle, one of few women in such a position. There, she met Gretchen Kalonji, a fellow engineering professor who became her long-time partner, and later a flash point for controversy. Neither

## Denice Denton through the years

1959

Born in El Campo, Texas

1966

Attends a summer engineering camp at Rice University, a turning point in high school that led her to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1981

Spends eight months as a design engineer in Fairchild Semiconductor's research-and-development lab in Palo Alto.

1982

Receives bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering from MIT.



JEFF MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

**WISCONSIN:** In 1992, as professor of electrical and computer engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Denice Denton talks to youngsters about those sciences at a preschool.

1987

Receives a doctorate in electrical engineering from MIT and the prestigious Presidential Young Investigator Award from the National Science Foundation.

1987

Hired as an assistant professor in electrical and computer engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of two women among a faculty of 180.



KAREN ORDERS — UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

**WASHINGTON:** At the University of Washington in 2003, Denton, the dean of engineering, joins Bill Gates, left, and computer science and engineering chair David Notkin at a campus event.

1988

Named UW-Madison electrical and computer engineering professor of the year.

1992

Granted tenure at UW-Madison.

1996

Named engineering dean at the University of Washington.

2004

Wins the presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring.

November 2004

Named the ninth chancellor of the University of California-Santa Cruz. She succeeds M.R.C. Greenwood, who left to take the No. 2 job in the UC system.

January 2005

Confronts Harvard President Larry Summers at an economic research forum in Cambridge, Mass., over the issue of women's scientific abilities. A controversy arises over the creation of a \$192,000-a-year UC job for her partner, Gretchen Kalonji.

February 2005

Starts the job on Valentine's Day. About two weeks later, she calls her assistant in a panic from Yosemite, saying she needed someone to pick her up. The UC Office of the President dispatches an employee. Her mother later suggests the incident was triggered by an acute thyroid condition.



GARY REYES — MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

**SILICON VALLEY:** Denton speaks at an April 2005 panel discussion in San Jose about the California business climate. With her, from left to right, are Adobe CEO Bruce Chizen, Solectron CEO Mike Cannon and Synopsys CEO Aart de Geus.

## ON THE OPINION PAGES

Her predecessor on the experiences of Denice Denton and what can be gained from them. **PAGE 5P**

a chancellor, especially one who had proved herself again and again as someone who powered through adversity throughout her life.

"It's very hard. When you come in as chancellor, you come in as the institution," said Greenwood, Denton's predecessor. "If they're mad at the institution, they're mad at you."

But few knew that in her first couple of weeks on the job, in late February 2005, during a quick getaway to Yosemite, she had called her assistant in a panic. Denton, who was on thyroid medication, needed someone to drive her home.

"We felt she was under stress," Dynes told the Mercury News, "and some medication had gone awry." Dynes said he never considered her mentally unstable.

## Mission misunderstood

Fifteen months later, the week before she requested a leave in June, more than 100 students protesting what they considered Denton's "rhetoric" about diversity outreach programs, barricaded her car when she tried to leave the parking lot.

"She said she had to go," recalled Josh Sonnenfeld, one of the protesters. But the students insisted she watch their skit. So they surrounded her car and donned paper-plate face masks.

"I can't watch this anymore. I have to go," Sonnenfeld recalls the chancellor saying.

It was five minutes, he said, before the students moved aside.

"It's unfortunate what happened," Sonnenfeld said. "But there are a lot of pressures with being head of a large university with a very vibrant political climate."

Denton called Tomlinson-Keasey, her friend from UC-Merced. The whole episode was frightening, she told her.

Denton sought refuge at Kalonji's apartment in San Francisco, a luxury high-rise that



Kalonji nor Denton's family members could be reached for comment.

## High hopes

When Denton rose above 700 others to be named chancellor in 2004, UC President Dynes told the Mercury News, "she's going to set Silicon Valley upside-down."

Denton's name spread even more when, a month before she assumed her new post, she made headlines challenging Harvard President Larry Summers, who suggested that genetic differences may be one factor behind the lack of women in the sciences.

"We thought, 'Wow, we have someone who's a national player, someone who will speak her mind and do something significant for women and minorities,'" said Margaret Leonard, a Santa Cruz lawyer and leader in the local gay and lesbian community. "I think the whole community was intrigued at that point. Everybody had high hopes."

But just weeks before her Feb. 14, 2005, start date, Denton's name was linked with scandal.

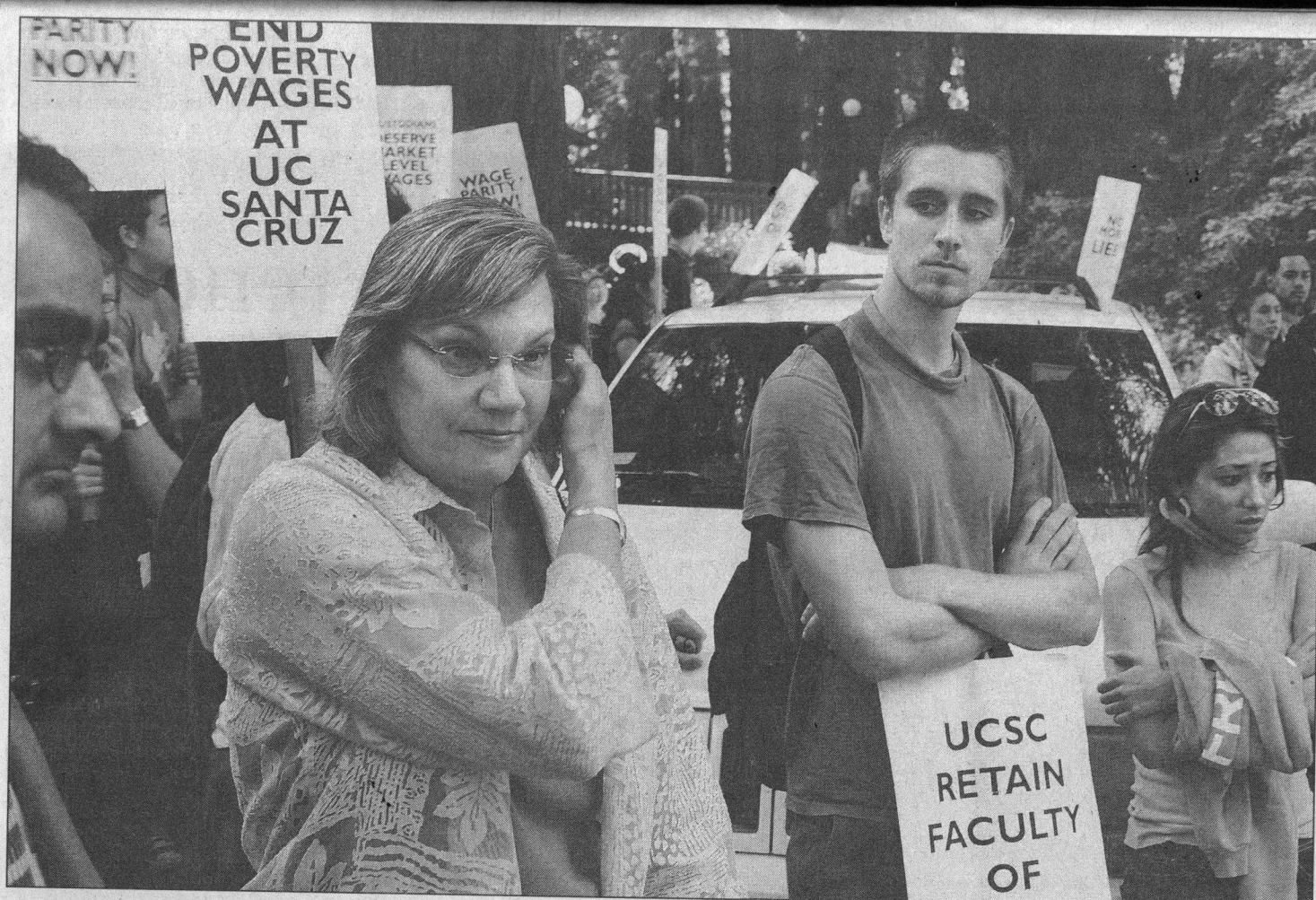
The San Francisco Chronicle reported that as part of Denton's hiring package, which included a \$275,000 salary, the UC president's office had created a \$192,000 job for her partner — or "lesbian lover" as the headline put it.

Kalonji, who had developed international strategies at the University of Washington, came to UC to similarly "internationalize" education. UC officials defended the move, saying job offers are often made to qualified spouses.

The timing couldn't have been worse. The whole UC leadership was under attack for overspending on top officials' salaries. Students at Santa Cruz were already protesting that many low-level campus staff, including custodians, were making poor wages. While the UC president's office acknowledged it should have disclosed the deal from the start, it was Denton who took the heat in Santa Cruz.

A month later, when faculty were in the midst of battling for affordable housing, newspapers reported that \$600,000 was spent to renovate Denton's campus residence.

Weeks later, in April 2005, Denton drew fire from faculty and students for authorizing



**SANTA CRUZ:** Denton shows up at a student demonstration at UC-Santa Cruz in June supporting maintaining a diverse faculty.

BRADLEY STUART — INDYBAY.ORG

### April 2005

Students set up a "tent university" protest. Denton authorizes campus police to arrest them; students accuse the police of brutality. Controversy erupts over \$600,000 in renovations at University House. Controversy later intensifies when it's revealed that Denton spent \$30,000 on an enclosure for her two dogs.

### April-October 2005

Serious vandalism occurs at her campus home. Campus police begin guarding the house. A new security system with motion detectors, electronic keys and door alarms are installed in the chancellor's office.

### November 2005

Her formal investiture as chancellor is overshadowed by news of Greenwood resigning over alleged improprieties in the hiring of her son and a friend with whom she owned rental property. Days later, the Santa Cruz Sentinel's managing editor suggests in a column that a "powerful coterie of lesbians" is running the UC system. Later in the month, Denton takes medical leave, which extends into most of December. She undergoes surgery for an ovarian cyst.

### June 15, 2006

Denton takes medical leave for undetermined physical or psychological reasons.

### June 24, 2006

Denton jumps off Kalonji's high-rise apartment building.

police to arrest student protesters who had erected a "Tent University" to protest fee increases and workers' low pay.

In June, a parking barricade was thrown through a bedroom window at Denton's home. She asked campus police to guard the house and had a sophisticated security system installed in her office. She told her friends she was afraid.

Then came reports that Denton's house had been outfitted with a \$30,000 dog run for her two border collies. UC officials

said the old fence was dilapidated and the new fence needed to be buried deep so the dogs wouldn't dig underneath.

But the explanation didn't quell the uproar.

"There was always something," Leonard said. "It seemed like the minute that's been resolved, it would be the next thing."

Sarcastic columns and searing political cartoons were rampant. They made fun of the numerous pairs of glasses she wore that color-coordinated

with her outfits. They criticized her social skills.

If she wasn't missing important community meetings, critics said, she wasn't interacting enough with the students.

The day after Denton's investiture ceremony, in November 2005, the Santa Cruz Sentinel's managing editor wrote in an opinion column that Denton's troubles, in part, added to the "whisper campaign that what is seen by some as a powerful coterie of lesbians has gained power and influence

within the UC system."

Said Leonard: "I was so ashamed of our little town. If this were Bakersfield, you'd expect it. But you think of Santa Cruz as so progressive."

Denton read all the stories, said Leonard, who would meet her on the beach to run their dogs.

"She had a really good sense of humor," Leonard said. "But after a while, it starts to hurt. She was very aware she was unliked."

Fragility was unexpected in

advertisers its rooftop deck as a relaxing refuge with panoramic views of the city.

In those final days, Tomlinson-Keasey talked to Denton and Kalonji often. "They were quite devoted to each other," she said.

Tomlinson-Keasey asked about Denton's thyroid medication, but the couple said they had consulted a doctor and "they seemed to think it wasn't contributing to depression."

Denton's spirits seemed to be improving late in the week, Tomlinson-Keasey said.

Denton's mother and brother flew in from Texas late on June 22 to stay with her. So Kalonji thought it was safe to leave on a business trip, Tomlinson-Keasey said.

On Saturday morning, June 24, when the sunny week had given way to a chilling fog, Denton's body was spotted atop an eight-story parking garage. Police say she had jumped from the skydeck of the attached apartment building, Kalonji's building. It was 44 stories high.

If Denton had more serious mental health issues, or her medication wasn't right, or she had other personal problems, no one is saying.

But Tomlinson-Keasey knows that the problems in Santa Cruz weighed heavily.

At the memorial service Thursday, more than 1,000 people — faculty, community leaders, media — formed a line around the theater.

Summer vacation had started and few students were on campus, either to march or to mourn. Chancellors, professors and family members on stage celebrated Denton's passion for education, for minority achievement, for social justice.

Paula Powell, director of the African American Resource and Cultural Center on campus, stood in the back of the theater. She was surprised to hear Denton was so accomplished.

"To me, it sounds like she was on the cause and she was misunderstood," Powell said after the service. "If she had known this outpouring of love when she was here, maybe she wouldn't have felt it was so lonely at the top."

*Staff Writers Becky Bartindale and Lisa Krieger contributed to this report.*

*Contact Julia Prodis Sulek at jsulek@mercurynews.com or (408) 278-3409.*