

29 November 2016

Celebration of Life for Sandi Morgen

Good afternoon. My name is Barbara Altmann. I worked at the University of Oregon for 25 years before leaving recently to take a job at Bucknell University.

When I saw the photograph of Sandi with a radiant smile that accompanied the announcement of this event, I wanted both to laugh and cry. Tears, obviously, because I no longer have the chance to sit across from or walk next to her laser-like focus, ready laugh, quick, humane intelligence, and intense sense of connection. Laughter, because no matter what the topic or the occasion, spending time with Sandi was a joy and a gift, and because I can still hear her voice so clearly in my head, especially when I feel the need for guidance in hard times.

As for so many others in the room, it was my privilege to work with Sandi at UO in many different ways over the years. In all of the roles she played here, Sandi had a powerful impact on the university and we are a different school because of her. I came to know her in her role as director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society, a position she assumed when she came to UO in 1991, and which she held until 2006. Over those 15 years, Sandi built CSWS from a small, local center into a major hub of research that helps define the interdisciplinary work of the College of Arts and Sciences and the University. As director, Sandi served as a model of scholarly and administrative leadership, always clear about the vision driving the Center and about priorities as the Center grew. Watching her in action, I learned how to run a good meeting, how to work in a team, how to practice collaborative research, and how to work with unwavering commitment and ethics. Under Sandi's leadership, CSWS provided a rich ground for understanding shared governance and how to work well through disagreement, including the invaluable lesson that disagreement need not lead inevitably to division or stasis, but actually helps test and improve an idea, and allows us to do our best thinking about a difficult matter.

When she and Robert left UO in 2006 to go to Penn State for two years, we were poorer for their absence. What a pleasure, then, to welcome them home in 2008, when Sandi stepped back in, this time as Associate Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Studies. At that time, I was a center director myself, and Sandi was invaluable, working under Vice President for Research Rich Linton, bringing together and working with centers in the humanities and social sciences. On the graduate school front, she worked tirelessly to recruit, support, and professionalize our graduate students, moving the Grad School toward the central position it needs to hold at an R1 university like this. Through Grad Council, she helped shape our graduate programs, as well, always with an eye to rigor, substance, and the mission of the university.

An abiding element of all Sandi's work that you will recognize was her advocacy for women on campus and in the profession in every aspect of her teaching, research, and administrative work. An award she won in 2006 from the American Anthropological Association acknowledged one piece of that sustained effort – she won what is called the “Squeaky Wheel Award for Dedication to Achieving Greater Gender Parity for Women in Anthropology,” and certainly would have won any other such “squeaky wheel” accolades were they to exist. I have met some of her students, who benefited from her training not only in their fields but also in the way universities work, and who have moved into powerful positions of their own. Here on our campus, we saw her mentor from every post she held, helping women gain skills,

confidence, and interest to better achieve in all aspects of their academic lives. She also spoke frequently and frankly with UO presidents and provosts about the importance of having women in senior leadership roles, and led by example throughout her entire career.

I come back, in closing, to why we are here: this is a celebration of life, and of a particularly rich and thoughtful life. It's also a celebration of many good times, and a great deal of love.

When I visited Sandi for the last time, she was her usual cogent self, and insisted, despite her obvious struggle with pain, that I tell her my news rather than focus on her. When I turned the conversation back after a few minutes, she said something that will stick with me: "Life," she said, "is about connecting. Death is about disconnecting, and that's really hard." I knew what she meant, of course: for a woman who valued connectedness so dearly, it must have been very hard to start letting go. But she left an enormously strong legacy. The day I was there, Sarah was at the house, and gave up her seat at Sandi's bedside for me while she went to work on a photo book in the next room. Seth was coming the next day, for his birthday. Robert and Mimi came through after a walk. Both of Sandi's sisters were present. A posted schedule detailed the many people who wanted to come by. A team of loving women came and went from the house, in shifts, to see to her needs. I don't think I've ever seen such a web of connectedness. For me, today's gathering is a bigger version, the UO version, of that web, and a measure of the mark she made on this community.

When I see the photo of Sandi smiling, I'll continue to think of the moments of pure, unalloyed fun we all had with her. In particular, I have to laugh every time I think of Sandi at a party, singing and dancing, belting out "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" along with Aretha, and giving a very convincing performance as an honorary member of the Supremes, complete with all the hand gestures choreographed to the tune of, "Stop, in the name of love!" I'm grateful to have a chance today with you all to stop, for a moment, in the name of RESPECT and love.