Stunned Campus Mourns Its Chief, an Apparent Suicide

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SANTA CRUZ, Calif., June 29 — They packed into a recital hall Thursday, hundreds strong, many in tears, remembering Denice Dee Denton, the chancellor of the shocked University of California campus here, who fell to her death from a skyscraper in San Francisco on Saturday, apparently by jumping.

Dr. Denton was once the only female dean at a top-tier research university, heading the College of Engineering at the University of Washington, and the speakers at the memorial service called her a pioneer who in turn had advanced the careers of other women and minorities in the sciences.

"She was a resolute and articulate spokesperson for the nation on the need to increase the pipeline of women and minorities in science and engineering careers," said France Cordova, chancellor of the University of California, Riverside, who was the host of Thursday's event.

Only a few speakers alluded to any controversy surrounding the 46-year-old Dr. Denton, though she had been a frequent target of broader criticism involving compensation practices by the University of California system. The attacks on her focused on some $600,000 in renovations to her residence on campus and the hiring of her longtime partner, Gretchen Kalonji, as system-wide director of international strategy development, at a reported annual salary of $192,000.

Dr. Denton was under treatment for a severe thyroid problem several months ago, and she went on medical leave on June 15, though the reason was undisclosed. But some speculated that her status as an openly gay woman was what had really driven much of the criticism of her and that it had all grown to be too much.

"She was a gay woman who was a chancellor and an engineer," Carol Tomlinson-Keasey, chancellor of the University of California, Merced, said in an interview. "You know that she came through some pretty difficult times, as many people who are breaking down barriers did."

Dr. Denton was among those who chastised Lawrence H. Summers when, as Harvard's president, he questioned women's scientific abilities at a conference she attended last year. Afterward, she described the event in an e-mail, jokingly titled, "Denice does Boston," said Alice Agogino, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley.
Alice Hogan, director of a National Science Foundation program that seeks to increase the number of women in academic science and engineering careers, was at the conference with Dr. Denton. "Making the science and engineering base of this country as broad and as talented as possible should not be contentious," she said in an interview Wednesday. "But it is."

And Angela Davis, a professor at the Santa Cruz campus, referred at the memorial to "the swirling controversies" and "unremitting homophobic attacks" that she said Dr. Denton had endured.

Dr. Denton arrived at Santa Cruz less than 18 months ago. Some recall it as a particularly difficult moment and say she was promptly caught up in its politics: the university, with an enrollment of about 15,000, was planning to grow, a touchy subject in town-gown relations.

"She arrived at a time when a lot was going on here," said one of those at the memorial service, Mason Cohn, who graduated this month and had met with Dr. Denton periodically while working for the student newspaper.

But Stephen Thorsett, dean of physical and biological sciences and a member of the committee that had recommended the hiring of Dr. Denton, said in an interview that this controversy had ultimately passed.

"There was a general feeling that we were on a forward track," Dr. Thorsett said, "and personally she seemed two weeks ago, when I saw her at the annual foundation board meeting, very on top of things, very relaxed. She had a sense of humor."

Like other colleagues of Dr. Denton, Dr. Thorsett said he was struck by criticism of her related to the controversy over university compensation. For one thing, he said, the decision to renovate the chancellor's residence was made before Dr. Denton ever set foot there. The idea that she asked for so much to be spent on the house, he said, "is simply wrong."

Some colleagues said Dr. Denton had worried for her safety, especially after someone threw a parking barrier through a plate glass window at the house one night last June.

No one was ever charged, and no motive determined. But such experiences had to hurt, Nancy Hopkins, a biology professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said in an interview. She recalled a telephone conversation this month in which Dr. Denton did not sound like herself.

"The person on the phone was almost gone," Dr. Hopkins said. "I almost couldn't recognize her. It was very upsetting."

But Dr. Hopkins and others also said they had admired Dr. Denton's resilience, evident in her willingness to use past experiences as teaching tools. Dr. Cordova, the chancellor at the Riverside campus, recalled in an interview that in a speech last year, Dr. Denton used personal experiences to illustrate how diversity could improve the quality of a faculty.

"It was very structured but entertaining," Dr. Cordova said. "She could be enormously funny with a lot of very colorful examples and a lot of data."

Losing Dr. Denton is a serious blow to women in the sciences, for whom she served as a role model, said Eve Riskin, a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Washington, who considered Dr. Denton a mentor.

"She was like a rock star," Dr. Riskin said, "for women in the sciences and engineering."
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