Marcia Guttentag: We Will Miss You

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On November 4, 1977, Marcia Guttentag died of a heart attack in a hotel room in Chicago. She was in transit on one of the innumerable assignments that she undertook—evaluating projects, consulting, lecturing. We know the life she led. It was like the one many of us are leading; overcommitted, extended physically beyond the limits of human physiology at 45, she rarely said no to a request.

I knew her only casually, had seen her only once or twice since a memorable weekend at Wesleyan University in the fall of 1972, when she had introduced a group of women's studies practitioners to the tools of evaluation. I remember my first impression: she was a mother, I thought (and I was not being literal); she was talking with sweet seriousness and in language as comfortable to us as to her. She was clear, she separated the questions as though they were strands to be tidied. She encouraged us to ask more difficult questions. We laughed a lot, partly with the self-consciousness of adult learners, partly with the pleasure of understanding.

For those who did not know her at all, perhaps it is important to tell more about Marcia Guttentag. She held official posts, for example, in the American Psychological Association and she had been president of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. She had also been “the first woman to serve” on various committees. She was a mother. She had been Visiting Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard and director of the Harlem Research Center. As described by Robert Perloff in a memorial tribute to her published in the Volume 4, 1977, issue of Evaluations: A Forum for Human Service Decision-Makers (501 South Park Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55415), her “books, articles, monographs, chapters, and edited volumes show how she put her brains and training where her heart was,” writing about such diverse topics as “demonstration for social change, evaluating mental health, poverty, undoing sex stereotypes, women and sanity, the social psychology of community control, issues in the treatment of addiction, the study and teaching of values,” and so forth.

I remember in particular, in her presentation on evaluation, one illustration she used—about the evaluation of Head Start programs that had used standardized procedures to gather cognitive information. Yet Head Start programs, Marcia explained, were never aimed—either in the legislation that established them or in their actual day-to-day operations—to effect cognitive change. Measured by their own goals, Head Start programs might have been seen as successful; measured by the goals of the investigator interested in cognition, they were “failures.”

To evaluate women's studies courses or programs, I remember her emphasis, you have to know what the courses and programs want to accomplish in the first place. We may all regret that Marcia did not go on, after that meeting, to organize an evaluation project for women's studies. She was recommending to us, even then, the decision-theoretic approach, described in an interview conducted shortly before her death and published in the issue of Evaluation mentioned above.

For all of us in women's studies, she has left a book, Undoing Sex Stereotypes: Research and Resources for Educators (McGraw-Hill, 1976). I am sorry that we never wrote to thank her (and those who worked with her) for it. The book describes—in language that all of us can read—an “intervention project” in three public school systems in the Boston area. For kindergarten teachers and for teachers of fifth- and ninth-grade classrooms, the researchers provided nonsexist curricular materials and an atmosphere of support and trust. The results are described and the materials included—in the hope that other teachers and school systems will be interested in replicating the project's successes and avoiding its failures.

Closeup: Women's Studies Department at San Diego

Despite hazards both external and internal, the Women's Studies Program at San Diego State University (SDSU) has now survived eight years, has been strengthened in the process, and has moved in new directions. Designated a “program” in 1970, it is in fact a functioning “department,” thanks to two successive supportive deans.

Funded initially by the SDSU Foundation in a period of militant feminism, in 1974 Women's Studies was assimilated into the administrative structure of the College of Arts and Letters. In the California State University system, funding for academic programs is determined almost exclusively by student enrollment. Departmental status