In Memoriam: Annette Kolodny

College of Humanities
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Professor Emerita Annette Kolodny, an internationally prominent feminist scholar who served as dean of the College of Humanities from 1988 to 1993, died Sept. 11 at the age of 78.

Kolodny was "a pioneer in the field of ecofeminism" who "connected the ravaging of the land, particularly in the opening of the American West, and the ravaging of women," according to an obituary in The New York Times [1].

Before joining the University of Arizona, Kolodny was already recognized as an internationally influential and prize-winning scholar, and had held faculty positions at Yale University, the University of British Columbia, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Maryland and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She was recruited to the University of Arizona to be the dean of the College of Humanities, becoming the first woman to be named an academic dean outside the College of Nursing.

Born in New York City on Aug. 21, 1941, Kolodny graduated magna cum laude from Brooklyn College with a degree in English. She received her doctorate in English and American literature from the University of California, Berkeley in 1969.

Kolodny's contributions to the University are celebrated at the Women's Plaza of Honor [2], where she is described as an "internationally influential and prize-winning scholar best known for her innovative work in the areas of feminist literary theory, ecocriticism, frontier studies, and early American literature."

As dean, Kolodny introduced a host of policy innovations designed to enhance the success of women and minority staff, students and faculty. She facilitated the development of new promotion and tenure guidelines, more democratic governance procedures, family-friendly policies, the increased hiring of women and minority faculty members and improved financial support for graduate students, and she introduced a "buddy system" for faculty and graduate students alike.

After stepping down as dean, Kolodny was named College of Humanities Professor of American Literature and Culture, and she continued to teach in the graduate program in comparative cultural and literary studies until her retirement in July 2007.

"Annette Kolodny was an innovator, both as a scholar and an administrator. Her groundbreaking interdisciplinary work created a model that has endured for decades," said College of Humanities Dean Alain-Philippe Durand. "Her tireless efforts to transform the College of Humanities into a more inclusive home for faculty and students alike are a legacy that continues today."

Judith McDaniel, now an adjunct instructor in the School of Government and Public Policy,
knew Kolodny long before either of them came to Arizona.

"What I remember about Annette is how incredibly strong and brave she was in putting herself on the line for her principles," McDaniel said. "She really, really made a difference to so many women who were still trying to grapple with whether they should be compliant and quiet or protest the treatments that were so unfair."

Later, as a dean, Kolodny was able to put those principles into action herself.

"It was always part of who she was and what she believed she should be doing, whether she was leading from being the renegade activist or whether she was leading from the administration," McDaniel said.

The pair became close friends in recent years, but McDaniel remembers her first impression from reading Kolodny's breakthrough book, "The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters."

"You could never really look at American literature again in quite the same way," she said. "That book was asking questions that simply hadn't been asked before in terms of scholarship. Why did the writers of the early American experience feel it was so necessary to portray the wilderness as female, as something to be conquered? It completely opened a different way of thinking about literature and what criticism could do."

Adele Barker, professor emerita in the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies, says Kolodny was not only a pioneer in feminist literary theory, but she took that theory and applied it to real life.

"She was trying to address and redress the power politics of academia, so that women could flourish," Barker says. "She wanted women to be in positions in the upper echelon of higher education. One of the things that really drove her as a dean was not only bringing more women into academia, but making sure they could be promoted and move into administration and be in decision-making positions."

The contributions Kolodny made to her field also can be found among the students she trained.

"She was rigorous in her thinking and she trained students to be rigorous in their thinking and they went on and got these marvelous jobs. She trained an entire generation of young people in how to think. They're all hugely indebted to her," Barker says. "She was devoted to her work, devoted to her field. She was devoted to the ideas that she wrote about and was devoted to having her students carry them forth."

Edison Cassadore, a faculty member in literature and humanities at Tohono O'odham Community College in Sells, took an independent study with Kolodny while he was working on his doctoral degree.
“She really had a hands-on approach to training doctoral students. I knew how to be prepared to be a professor and how to do research in archives. It was a well-rounded preparation,” Cassadore says. “She had a very tenacious drive. That’s what a lot of people admired about her, her will to not only be successful, but to do the highest quality work you can do. That’s what she impressed upon me, to always do your best because your students are relying on you.”

Read more about Kolodny in her family obituary [3].

A version [4] of this article originally appeared on the College of Humanities website.

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