

Remembering Erika Pilver  
Month Celebrating Women kick-off event  
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I worked with Erika for many years in the Department of Political Science. In fact, when I joined the department, Erika was the only woman professor and she took me under her wing. She made a few things clear to me immediately:

- Political Science is the best department on campus, with faculty who embrace collegiality and care about students and each other.
- I was selected for the position because, in addition to the required credentials, experience, and performance at the interview, the faculty believed I would fit into that desirable circumstance.
- And I better fall in if I knew what was good for me!

Of course, Erika was far more diplomatic than that – though she still scared me a little – but clearly she had set a tone that she wanted to continue. And she had good reason. By that time, she had been at Westfield for 23 years, her first year as part of the History Department with one or two other Political Science colleagues, and beginning with her second year as part of the separate Political Science Department that she helped create.

Some of you may recall that the department office, for years located in the basement of Parenzo Hall, was an open area which Erika loved for its atmosphere encouraging discussions about teaching and debates about politics. It seemed inspired by the Bull Pen in a newspaper city room, where reporters and editors work, and where everybody could observe anyone else's business at all times. Again, a bit intimidating for a new faculty member.

Despite this, and alongside her high expectations for others, Erika was always a generous human being and a gracious mentor, with a drive to improve teaching, and welcoming and supporting of others. I continue to be inspired by her dedication to public service, her fierce promotion of women's empowerment, and her rigorous preparation of students for careers in government and non-profit education.

- Erika had what she described as “an abiding passion” for government that started in high school in Thompson, CT where she grew up. She majored in POLS as undergrad.
- She worked as a newspaper reporter and then editor of a small, local weekly while earning her MPA – then she left newspaper work to enroll full time in a PhD program at the University of Connecticut.
- In the world of journalism, Erika had seen and experienced lots of sex discrimination. Yet she still chose that work, and then chose for her doctorate Political Science, another field of study and teaching dominated by men.

- When she finished her PhD in political science, specializing in public administration, she was hired at Westfield as the first woman political science faculty member.

Through her more than 40 years here, Erika was an active faculty member, serving on all of the major university committees, serving in leadership positions in national and regional professional organizations including the National Women's Studies Association and National Women's Hall of Fame, had nearly 40 publications, and was a prodigious conference presenter.

And she left her mark in so many other ways. For just a few, in addition to helping create the POLS department:

- Within a few years of starting here, she established the relationship between Westfield and The Washington Center, making Westfield one of the early participants in the program that serves students from all majors. Since then, more than 560 Westfield students have experienced internships in the nation's capital, the highest number of any public university in the state.
- Later, Erika was one of the founding mothers of the Women's Studies Program, taught courses and served as its chair for many years, and supported the creation of the Department of Ethnic and Gender studies on campus.
- It was Erika's idea that we should include in the Political Science learning outcomes being arrested at a demonstration.
- As a professor, her questions always started with: Who benefits? Who pays? Who decides? Who influences the decision-makers? Her instruction to students, question everything, is still excellent advice today.

Erika told so many poignant stories, many that were amusing and sad at the same time. In one, she described being the only woman in a group of political science professors at an annual American Political Science Association conference in Boston. At the end of the conference day, the group wanted to go to the Playboy Club, and when Erika objected, they assumed it was because, as they had already learned, she didn't drink alcohol. She had to explain to them that it wasn't the alcohol that bothered her, it was the objectification and degradation of women. They were nonplussed.

She had been deeply concerned for years, decades really, about the fragility of women's reproductive rights. Though not generally a cynic, she long predicted last year's Dobbs decision by the Supreme Court overturning Roe v Wade and the constitutional right to abortion.

Erika had the curiosity of a scholar, the deep faith and joy of religious conviction, and the warmth of a truly caring professor and colleague. At the end of the day, in fact at the end of each day, it was her generosity of spirit that triumphed, a true role model and mentor.