

UC SANTA BARBARA

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An Accidental Feminist

For a time early in her career, Barbara Voorhies was the only female tenured professor in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Anthropology. In fact, she was one of only 30 or so female faculty members on campus.

She had co-authored a groundbreaking book, "Female of the Species," in 1975 about the roles of women in societies from the hunter-gatherers to farming societies and beyond. Yet Voorhies said she never identified strongly as a feminist, which was why she was taken aback to learn she would be honored with the American Anthropological Association's Committee on Gender Equity in Anthropology Award.

"My first reaction was that I've never been an active feminist, meaning being right out there in the trenches fighting the feminist battle," said Voorhies, a professor emerita and research professor in UCSB's Department of Anthropology. "It was never my particular interest or goal. What I had always tried to do, and would like to be remembered for, was to be fair and equal to everybody."

And that, as the group of women and former UCSB graduate students who nominated Voorhies explained it, was exactly why her name was submitted. What's more, her male colleagues told her they would have nominated her, too, if anyone had asked.

"She has a lot of academic grandchildren," said Douglas Kennett, a professor of anthropology at Penn State who earned his undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees at UCSB, completing his work in 1998. "There was never that sort of gender

agenda. She was just a great scientist — and is a great scientist.”

Kennett discovered his love for anthropology — and archaeological anthropology in particular — during a senior seminar taught by Voorhies, a Mesoamerica specialist who focused much of her work on the early foragers who lived on the coast of Chiapas, Mexico, leaving behind great shell mounds.

Until that time, Kennett said, he thought of archaeology as merely the study of “stones and bones” and had not considered how artifacts reflected the behaviors of people who lived long ago, an epiphany that sparked his academic career. “I remember a very distinctive time when I had been in the seminar and I was driving home and I had been so engrossed in the seminar, when I got there I couldn’t even remember how I got home,” he said.

Miriam Chaiken, a distinguished professor and chair of the department of anthropology at New Mexico State University, is the former UCSB graduate student who led the effort to nominate Voorhies for the CoGEA award, which recognizes those whose service, research, teaching and mentoring “bring to light and investigate practices in anthropology that are potentially sexist and discriminatory based on gender presentation.”

Chaiken did not study closely under Voorhies but gave a guest lecture in one of Voorhies’ classes shortly before completing her doctorate in 1983.

“Because she was the lone female faculty member — which is kind of hard to imagine in this day and age; there was one adjunct — she felt it was important to mentor all of us and be there as a source of support,” Chaiken said. “She’d invite all the women graduate students to her house to sit and talk. Instead of creating a climate where everybody felt they had to step on someone else to get ahead, she was interested in fostering collaboration.

“I think we all saw her as a role model,” Chaiken continued. “She was the person we all wanted to be a few years down the line. She had a successful career and was well respected. We all wanted to be like Barbara someday, and largely we have done that.”

Voorhies — who earned her Ph.D. at Yale in 1969, arrived at UCSB as a visiting professor in 1970 and became an assistant professor in 1971 — did not seem to realize the influence she had.

“I have mixed feelings,” she said. “In a sense, I’m really glad I was able to make a difference in the lives of these women. That’s a wonderful thing. At the same time, I feel if only I had realized, if I had known more about what was going on, I could have done more. I really just wanted to be fair to all my students. I wanted to give everybody an equal chance on the playing field. I didn’t feel I was privileging women; that would have made me uncomfortable. I didn’t want to be seen as someone who saw people as women, men or polka-dotted. That’s what’s important to me. These women said, ‘That is what you did.’ ”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.