UC SANTA BARBARA

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Destined for History

Visiting her childhood home several years ago, when her parents were in clearing-out mode, Leila Rupp came across a shoebox, pulled from the back of a closet, containing the only doll she'd had as a kid. The box was tied with a string and labeled, "Terri Lee: 1956-1958."

Curious about that label, Rupp's partner and fellow UC Santa Barbara professor, Verta Taylor, pointed to it and asked, essentially, "Huh?" Laughing sheepishly as she recounted the moment, Rupp recalled telling Verta, "Those were the years I played with that doll."

A historian from the start.

That's how this feminist studies scholar — niece and namesake of a high school history teacher, daughter of a "history-obsessed" dad — characterizes herself. But what perhaps began as simply an inherited interest is today Rupp's professional passion.

From her 25-year stretch at Ohio State University, where she helped launch and grow the women's studies department, to her ongoing tenure at UCSB, where she is also an associate dean, Rupp has major academic bona fides. That includes some 10 books in print and accolades aplenty, none of which she takes lightly.

"It was always a dream that I would end up in a job like this," Rupp said. "What I felt then is what I say when I'm recruiting grad students now: 'If you would do this even if you knew you wouldn't get an academic job at the end, you should go ahead and

do it.’ You really have to enjoy what you do, and do it because you love it. And I really loved, loved, loved it. I still do.”

The feeling, it seems, is mutual.

Consider this: In January, at its 130th annual conference, the American Historical Association offered the session “Transforming Women’s History: Leila Rupp — Scholar, Editor, and Mentor,” in which five scholars from assorted illustrious universities discussed her impact on the field.

And that’s not the only recent evidence of Rupp’s beloved profession returning her affections. Her latest book, “Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History” (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), won a 2015 Lambda Literary Award for Best Anthology. Akin to the Oscars, the “Lammys,” as they’re known, celebrate the best LGBT books of the year.

Co-edited with Rupp’s former graduate student turned collaborator, Susan K. Freeman, that book in the last year also was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Book by the American Library Association, and a Best Special Interest Book by both Public Library Reviewers and the American Association of School Librarians.

“It does feel good, all of these things, especially because it’s always a surprise,” Rupp said. “You never know how things are going to turn out when you’re doing them, so it feels really nice when the response is so enthusiastic. All the stuff that I’ve written about queer history, about queer lives, is special to me, because I feel it makes a difference to people in the world.”

A seminal book made a similar difference in Rupp’s own life and set her on the path down which she is still charging full bore. In the summer of 1969, following her first year at Bryn Mawr, Rupp discovered Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” and it changed her world.

“It was probably the first feminist book I’d read and I was completely blown away,” she said. “It made everything about my life make sense. And I never turned back. I went back to college and started writing all my papers about women or gender in one way or another, in all my courses, whatever the topic. And I’ve been doing that ever since.”

At UCSB, Rupp’s diverse contributions to the field, and to history itself, include her advocacy for the feminist studies department to be so named. It was originally and for years known as “women’s studies,” which to Rupp rang exclusive and inaccurate.

“The more things you name, the more things you’re leaving out,” she said. “And I didn’t, and don’t, see ‘feminist studies’ as political or as negative, but as, accurately, what we’re doing, which is viewing a whole range of things in the world from a perspective that sees gender as really critical and connects it to other things like race and class and sexuality. And it’s honesty in advertising. We’re not looking at everything about women and we’re not looking just at women. There are a lot of different kinds of feminist perspective, and we’re open to all of them.”

Said Melvin Oliver, UCSB’s SAGE Sara Miller McCune Dean of Social Sciences and executive dean of the College of Letters and Science, “Working with Leila Rupp in her roles as both professor of feminist studies and associate dean in the College of Letters and Science has been one of the great pleasures of my career at UCSB. Her path-breaking scholarship and commitment to advancing the field of feminist studies is unparalleled.

“As I have watched her thrive as a mentor and a leader on campus, I believe she exemplifies the engaged, approachable faculty we are so proud to recruit and support,” Oliver continued. “I applaud all of her recent awards and kudos, of which more are surely to come.”

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.