

Denice D. Denton Memorial Symposium July 30, 2007
Welcoming remarks and overview of the day by Vicki Bier

Vicki Bier: On behalf of myself, this organizing committee, which is Susan Millar, Amy Wendt, Lydia Zepeda, and Jenn Sheridan, on behalf of all of WISELI – the Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute – and the Chancellor’s Office, which is sponsoring this event, I’d like to welcome you all to the Denice Denton Memorial Symposium here in Madison. It still seems unbelievable and certainly tragic that we are having a Denice Denton Memorial Symposium. But on the other hand it’s wonderful that so many of you have shown up for her, and I hate cutting off conversations going on around the table – I’m sure they’re all exciting.

[*TAPE BREAK*]

There are a lot of very important and influential people here today, so there’s no way that I could possibly ever introduce all of them – we’d be here all day – but I did want to have a few people stand up now just to be acknowledged. First of all, the other members of the organizing committee: Susan, Amy, and Lydia. [*Applause*] Jo Handelsman and Molly Carnes, who were the original co-directors of WISELI. [*Applause*] Paul Percy, Dean of the College of Engineering, and Gary Sandefur, Dean of Letters and Sciences. [*Applause*] Of course, our guest speaker Donna Shalala, who I’ll be introducing more formally in a little bit. [*Applause*] And Jo and Molly also specifically asked me to introduce Dan Schwartzenruber, who made some of the videos documenting WISELI’s progress over the years. He is with Eclipse Multimedia Productions. The most recent WISELI video is currently running on the Research Channel and the Madison Metropolitan School District Channel – which I understand is channel 10 – and actually some of the video products that Dan has made for us have been award-winning productions thanks to his great effort, so I wanted to acknowledge him. [*Applause*] Again, I know there’s a lot of important people in this room, so I haven’t been able to introduce everybody – I hope you’ll forgive me. Any other logistical details that I haven’t attended to? Okay. If they come up, feel free to ask.

Before we get started with our plenary presentation, today I wanted to say just a few brief words of my own about my thinking behind putting this event together, and I wanted to start with some snippets from something that I wrote almost exactly a year ago. It was posted August 1st, 2006 when we were all still dealing with the immediate emotional aftermath of Denice Denton’s death. What I wrote then was that many of us have greatly missed Denice as she has moved on – first moving away from Madison, where so many of us got to know her, and then of course with her death. **It now falls to us to do for ourselves, and for other people, all of the things that Denice did for us in our lives.** To me that’s really the purpose of today’s program, is to start dealing with how we can move forward and make sure that Denice’s legacy stays alive in the world, and that we’re continuing to make progress on all of the issues that she thought so passionately about, including diversity in science and engineering, mentoring, excellence in education, outreach, academic leadership, and a long list of other issues as well.

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One of the ways we are hoping to do that is through fundraising in Denice's honor. As Amy Wendt mentioned last night, there is a Denice Denton Memorial Fund at the University of Wisconsin. If you open your packet, the information on the Memorial Fund is on the right-hand side of your packet. That gives a description of what the fund is about. After much discussion last fall we decided that the fund would have two main purposes: one is to continue the pipeline by providing some scholarship support for students who had demonstrated interest in and a commitment to some of the issues that Denice held dear and worked for in her life; and the second was the distinguished lecture series in Denice's name that would bring people to campus who had been influential leaders in advancing those issues. So that would give a chance for people across the campus to all benefit from the Denice Denton Memorial Fund, so that we would be doing one thing that would benefit an individual student, and an event that would be open to everyone on our campus. I know that a lot of you in this room have already donated to the Denton Memorial Fund, so I want to thank all of you. If either after this symposium, or at a later time as you are able, you can give again, we are of course happy to have additional contributions. And those of you that have not yet given, we hope that many of you will be able to donate to the Denice Denton Memorial Fund after this symposium. There is an envelope for your convenience in the right-hand side of your packet, and also instructions about how to donate electronically on the Web if you prefer to do so.

So the fundraising is important and valuable, but really pales in comparison to the efforts of all of us in the room, and all of our broader networks to make things happen day-to-day in the real world. So that's a bigger part of continuing Denice's legacy. Going back to, again, some of what I wrote last August, in continuing the things that Denice did for us in our lives, my own short version of some of those things were: inspiring all of us to be more fearless and not be held back by self-doubt; believing that we could do anything we wanted to accomplish – that no goal or project was too big to tackle if it was worth doing; making sure to have as much fun as possible while doing that work. And I think sometimes one of the downfalls as the efforts that we've worked towards have become institutionalized, after a while the meetings are kind of in informal meeting rooms on campus with no tickers and minutes and everything, and it's not quite as fun and exciting as the rabble-rousing sessions on the terrace or whatever.

So we have to find a way to keep the fun in the work and create a sense of community. I think in the planning for this event, some of the things that the organizing committee felt were important were, first of all, to maintain the connections in the network among the people who already knew Denice and who knew each other. But also, Denice was really wonderful at reaching out to new people. Just at our table this morning we were remarking on the fact that she could meet somebody one afternoon and invite them over to her house the next day and just say, "oh sure, come on over, there'll be a lot of people." She was always great at not just maintaining a network, but extending it to include new people

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– whoever happened to come along into her orbit. Those are some of the goals that I personally had for today – to keep that spirit of how to get things done alive in the world.

With that, I wanted to keep my remarks brief, and we will have plenty of time for discussion. We have a little bit of an outline for you today. We're going to start with our plenary speaker, Donna Shalala. After that there will be a panel discussion of people who knew Denice well throughout her years at Wisconsin talking about her contributions, her impact, and the lessons that we've learned from her and her experiences here. And we will follow that up with breakout sessions that are designed to be more forward-looking – what are the next steps, and how do we continue all of those efforts. So that's a brief outline of the day, and with that I think I'm ready to introduce Dr. Shalala.