

## **Dr. Rachel Brett Harley left a legacy of music education and fighting for women's equality**

Dr. Rachel Brett Harley, who taught Eastern Michigan's first Introduction to Women's Studies course in 1980, recently passed away at 79 after leaving a legacy of scholarship, student engagement and fighting for women's equality during a 35-year career at the University.

Harley received a bachelor's and master's degree in music education from the University of North Carolina, not far from where she grew up in rural Virginia. Never one to shy away from an adventure even at an early age, Harley moved from her family home to the University of Michigan where she would earn a PhD in music education with a specialization in classroom music. She started her career with EMU in 1969.

Harley impacted hundreds of students at EMU with her own iconoclastic brand of idealism and positivity. Her lifelong advocacy for women's equality was perhaps inspired by her childhood growing up in a time and a place where conditions for women's rights were very different from today.

"Rachel would think about how the world could be and should be better for women," says Dr. Linda Pritchard, Professor Emerita of History and Women's and Gender Studies at EMU. "Her activities in the 1970s fell in line with other political movements that were happening around women's equality at the time. She remained active in those after moving to Michigan and was involved locally in the Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor community."

"She is really an historical figure in terms of women's movement in the community," added Pritchard.

Harley helped establish women's support centers, the Ann Arbor Women's Center, SafeHouse and the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in Lansing. She also served on the board of directors for NARAL Pro-Choice America. At Eastern, she helped pioneer the women's studies program created in 1975, now the Department of Women's and Gender studies. The department offered the first minor in Women's Studies in the state and now boasts a vibrant and engaged department faculty which can be attributed to Harley's commitment to advancing the program.

Dr. Diane Winder, a professor in the School of Music & Dance for over 30 years and a close friend, says advocating for women's equality helped Harley find her voice as a young woman. Growing up, Harley was a musician and a relentless reader of books, says Winder, which made her stand out in the rural community of Franklin, Virginia.

"I think partly she was inspired by the times and the people around her," says Winder. "The family had a big apple tree in their yard, and Rachel would climb up and just read. She would read, read, read."

Despite breaking free from the boundaries of her upbringing, Harley preserved her Virginia roots, and maintained a trademark southern twang in her voice.

If fighting for women's equality became Harley's mission, her original passion was music. She played the piano, the double bass and sang. Her tenure at EMU started in the School of Music & Dance in 1969 where she taught courses about music for the classroom teacher before splitting her time between Music & Dance and WGST. Winder and her spouse became close friends with Harley and her partner, Theodore Harley, who was a jazz bassist and preceded her in death some years ago. Winder has good memories of their time together including some ferociously competitive Scrabble games.

"She was a killer Scrabble player," says Winder. "She would study the Scrabble board and she'd wallop down a massive word and get enormous amounts of points. She was very competitive but had a heart of gold."

But more than anything, Winder remembers her deep dedication to the students saying that she was "100 percent for the students." Outside of class, Harley spent much of her time mentoring and advising. She served as the undergraduate adviser and chairperson of the general music education/music therapy program for many years. Then she worked as the first undergraduate adviser in WGST for over a decade.

"What I always knew is how much she cared for the students," says Linda Pritchard. "Her students really adored her."

EMU alumna Terri Johnson (BS91, MS94) was one of those students and got to know Harley well as her teaching assistant for the first Introduction to Women's Studies honors course and for the Women's Studies program. That experience has stayed with Johnson through her personal and professional life. Johnson is now Assistant Dean for Multicultural Affairs at Southwestern University in Texas.

"Right away from that moment I started working for her, it was just amazing," says Johnson. "She is a great mentor. Throughout the time I was working as a TA, she was always right there. She was patient and was just there helping me with anything I needed."

Above all, Johnson remembers the passion that Harley exuded as a teacher. She says Dr. Harley would go over and beyond for her students.

"She poured her heart into everything she did," says Johnson. "She was one of the most passionate people I have ever seen. Her classes came to life."

Having stayed connected throughout the years, Johnson remembers speaking with Harley in the summer – a conversation that turned out to be their last.

“I’m so glad I was able to talk to her, because during that conversation I just told her thank you so much for everything,” says Johnson. “There’s so much of my life both personally and professionally that wouldn’t have happened without her guidance.”

**Distinguished Leaders of Women’s Studies endowed scholarship**

To honor Dr. Harley, her dedication as a teacher and leader, please consider donating to Distinguished Leaders of Women’s Studies, an endowed EMU scholarship that acknowledges Rachel as one of the department’s founders who began the first Women’s Studies minor in the state in 1975. The scholarship recognizes “outstanding academic success for a WGST major or graduate student.” Donate via [www.emich.edu/foundation/give/](http://www.emich.edu/foundation/give/) and type in Distinguished Leaders of Women’s Studies to complete the donation.