Phoebe S. Leboy, Groundbreaking Activist for Women in STEM

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PHOEBE STARFIELD LEOY, scientist and tireless advocate for women in science and engineering, passed away on June 16, 2012, at the age of 75, after a lengthy battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease).

Professor Leboy was a rare creature when she joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine in 1967, one of only a few women among many men. She was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure only 3 short years later, and to the rank of Professor in 1976. For 21 years, she remained the only tenured woman in the School of Dental Medicine. Professor Leboy had a distinguished career in two unrelated areas of research. Her early career focused on nucleic acid modifications, presaging the recent explosion of work in the new field of epigenetics. Her later work focused on bone-forming adult stem cells, and made her a pioneer in the field of what is now known as regenerative medicine. However, perhaps her greatest scientific impact was through her activism for other women scientists.

Her advocacy for women began in 1970, with formation of Women for Equal Opportunity at the University of Pennsylvania, an organization that Professor Leboy chaired. The organization was formed in response to the University’s failure to develop a federally mandated affirmative action plan, the need for which was dramatically demonstrated by the finding that in 1971, only 7% of faculty positions were held by women. After a series of rapes on campus, Professor Leboy organized a sit-in at the central administration building of the University. Ultimately, negotiations led to numerous advances that made Penn a model for other academic institutions in its programs for women, with founding of the Penn Women’s Center, a Women’s Studies Program, victim support and special services, and increased campus safety for women. Penn Professor Janice Madden summarized, “Over the 40 years that I have been at Penn, Phoebe has contributed to every single milestone—be it policy, program, or other achievement—for women faculty.”

In 2001, in response to an initiative by the Ford Foundation, presidents, chancellors, provosts, and several leading scholars from nine top research universities met at MIT to engage in an unprecedented discussion on barriers to success for women faculty in science and engineering. The group, now known as the MIT9, released a statement agreeing to analyze salaries and university resources provided to women faculty. MIT Professor Nancy Hopkins remembers Dr. Leboy as an integral part of MIT9: “[Phoebe] was fearless in speaking out and in turning what can be contentious issues into issues of simple common sense and common decency. I don’t know what makes a person possess such a powerful innate sense of fairness as Phoebe has or that equips them with the courage to act on their convictions with risk and no obvious professional benefit to themselves. But I do know that at least hundreds and more probably thousands of women scientists owe the ease of their life in science to the courageous and brilliant efforts of Phoebe Leboy.” The group has continued to meet annually, and has since broadened its focus to include both women faculty and underrepresented minorities in STEM fields.

Upon retirement from the University, Professor Leboy took her advocacy for women on the road, becoming President of the Association for Women in Science. She continued to work throughout her illness to promote women and underrepresented minorities in STEM fields. At the time of her death, she held a grant from the National Science Foundation on gender inequity in science, and was actively publishing the findings of this research. In recognition of her leadership, the Association for Women in Science has created the Phoebe S. Leboy Public Policy Fellowship, and the American Society for Bone and Mineral Research established the Phoebe Leboy Professional Development Award.

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