

An Academic Cinderella in the Ivory Tower

By Alexis Krasilovsky

Once upon a time in California, affirmative action enabled people like me to get jobs teaching. My Cinderella story began in 1987, when I was hired by California State University, Northridge to replace two retiring, full-time male professors: one in screenwriting, the other in film production.

I was frantic to pull myself out of the film artist and poet routine that had netted me screenings on PBS but given me less of an income than a welfare mother. I was ready to do anything, short of sleeping with someone, to get a fast take on how to teach. So I bartered, taking notes in the story structure seminar of screenwriting guru Robert McKee in return for sweeping his conference room floor and cleaning the toilets. Thus prepared, along with my track record as an independent filmmaker and a Yale degree, I entered academia, ready to take on a four-course teaching load with what McKee had taught

me, as well as from what I had learned firsthand, making movies.

In the beginning, I concentrated on my most brilliant students, like Kathy McWorter, soon to become the first woman in Hollywood to earn a million dollars for a screenplay. I had no compassion for the rest of the class, tossing the crumbs of my learning to low-SAT, low-achievers as if to sparrows. I deserved their terrible student evaluations.

Enter my fairy godmother: the chair of my department. Dr. Judith Marlane was ready to break her magic wand in two to help me reach all of my students. I learned to treat each classroom like a schoolhouse on the prairie, where each student seeks transformation at his or her individual level.

Some of my students, in turn, became my mentors: Erich Leon Harris, who sold his student screenplay to Showtime, taught me to ignore spelling and grammar when rough drafts showed genius;

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Joseph Lisuzzo taught me not to exclude white males in my zest to encompass multicultural diversity in my classroom. Eventually, their coaching turned me into a personal consultant to my students' academic and creative needs.

I started out the angry feminist, while Dr. Marlane used her lady-like poise, her diplomacy and careful tact to persevere in her position as chair. What I learned to do with the departmental clowns who considered me at first another academic joke was to make their challenges to my being there a different form of mentorship.

If given broken cameras to teach with, I'd teach my students to wheel and deal with the industry for freebies and discounts. If told I couldn't go for early promotion, I'd serve on three-fold the number of committees, direct three times as many films, and write three times as many articles as the administrative manual suggested. I'd dance like Cinderella 'til midnight—which is when I usually finished grading papers and preparing lecture notes.

I joined the California Faculty Association, gulping down pizza at their meetings, but failed to stay long enough for the union discussions about maintaining workload standards, expanding maternity leaves and health care, and other issues that have proven central to

my academic longevity.

If I was sometimes Cinderella, other times I was one of her stepsisters. Cinderella's stepsister was the dark, academic drone, locking within me my thirst for personal filmmaking, taunting me to scrawl illegible lines of poetry while driving on the freeway to school, left hand on the steering wheel, piles of student papers waiting for me in the trunk of the car like dead bodies, along with piles of unwashed laundry.

The stepsister wore silk blouses whose bows choked my neck in pomp and circumstance on the Academic Council, while Cinderella burned at the stake inside my gut. The stepsister worked in a university much like the day school that produced Jane Eyre, the governess, rather than Charlotte Brontë, the writer. The stepsister had no strategies for creative writing within the confines of her teaching responsibilities. She hadn't heard the wake-up call of bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, which brings the silenced and the censored back from the attic of our minds.

Yet who was I to complain, tenure-track? Everyone teaches a four-course load at California State University, Northridge. Would I give up a steady salary when most artists starve, their work invisible

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and unacknowledged? Would I give up a full-time teaching gig, when so many Ph.Ds are adjuncts driving cabs? Would I have survived the tenure-track in the Ivy League, when only nine of Yale's tenured faculty today are female?

I'd met my prince. He was the California State University system itself. My marriage in Tenure-Land would never end in divorce, begging for alimony. Tenure is the happily ever after. Then my biological clock took over. I imported an old boyfriend from Memphis and got pregnant. But he wasn't presentable at the Court. He wore ponchos, played jazz, and took drugs. During a keynote speech, he used his psychic power at the banquet table to crack a crystal wine glass in front of the personnel committee. He wasn't a Faculty Wife.

When I look at my son's baby pictures, I realize that photos are all I have of his babyhood. When he was four weeks old, I went back to the full-course load, plus committees, articles, and book writing, because I'd been warned my colleagues wouldn't take me seriously if I took a leave of absence.

At my first faculty meeting after the birth, I had to bring a pillow to sit on because I was still so sore from 22 hours of hard labor. Meanwhile, my son's father gave our infant son bottles of my breast milk, changed his diapers, and held

him in his arms until I came home.

I used to run almost screaming down the halls at work—my breasts like iron funnels—to ensure 10 minutes of breast pumping time in between classes. If a student stopped me in the hallway with a question, the milk would leak down my shirt. Then there's the time my office-mate walked in on me while I was trying to let down the milk, and he told me not to worry, since he was only making a phone call.

I used to go home and sob from post-partum blues, raking my intellectual ashes for some lost spark. I'd nurse the baby on the right breast, and grade papers on the left side. Then I'd switch: baby on the left, papers on the right.

For Mother's Day this year, our faculty association wrote letters to the chancellor asking to extend the time period for paid parental leave, so younger colleagues will not face these hardships. In retrospect, although I am glad I got the tenure I worked so hard to obtain, I am sorry that I can barely remember how sweet my son was as a little baby. His babyhood lies like little glass splinters blown from the marble staircase by a cruel, administrative wind. When I walk through the corridors on my way to my classes, I step on them, and my feet bleed.

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After two years of parenting, my son's father moved back to Tennessee. Fortunately for me, by now there was another single mother in the department. We mentored each other on childcare and academic survival.

But before our tenure could happen, a 6.7 earthquake ripped the Northridge campus apart. Suddenly, the petty ins and outs of promotion were whisked away like evil stepsisters' face powder. We had no books, no equipment, no lecture notes, no classrooms: all lay buried in rubble. The first class of the semester began in a trailer. We had no projector, although it was a film class. What would I teach them?

The Secret Service entered the trailer and told us to evacuate: Vice President Al Gore was on campus to address the \$350 million in damages. I had my camera with me and asked my students if anybody wanted to go film the Vice President. Suddenly, everybody wanted to learn film production.

The making of a documentary film with my students about the chaos that the earthquake caused on campus validated the chaos that was part of the waking, normal pattern of my life as a single mother trying to be a full-time professor. Our documentary was a firsthand account of what it meant to be stu-

dents and teachers surviving a 6.7 earthquake together, including students forced to flee from the cracked, crumbling dorms.

I would rush into faculty meetings looking ragged and sweaty, balancing a tripod and 16mm camera full of that day's earthquake coverage. My students filmed me pulling books out of my office in a wheelbarrow, and my son playing in the debris of our home, which was still rocking.

In some ways, making a film about the earthquake helped us to confront our fears; in other ways, it compounded them. I was sure the film would help the campus to heal. But I worried about jealousy from less productive colleagues, and balanced badly my filming activities with my teaching and my child's kindergarten schedules. I had difficulty sleeping and breathing. I was determined to complete the film in time for "Earthquake Awareness Week," premiering it on the anniversary of the university's reopening. Yet the university did not participate in the film financially, and my lab bills reached \$30,000.

I was anxious to complete the film and a book, before the affirmative action program that had come into being around the time of my hiring finally came to an end. We screened the film for a week in a West Hollywood movie theater,

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recruiting students and alumni to handle the press, carefully clipping the good reviews that came our way, even though the film failed to make any money. The awards that a segment of the film won at festivals helped in my successful bid for tenure.

But relocating my office after the earthquake, and carrying cases of books, films, and equipment back and forth from temporary trailers to my home office, had taken its toll. A frozen shoulder and the accompanying pain in my neck and arm kept me out of work for five weeks. What if I had been one of the thousands of California faculty who do not qualify for health benefits?

Even after I returned to work, the painkillers, muscle relaxants, hot showers, ice packs and physical therapy dominated my routine. I spent my lunch hours lying on the floor in my office with my head in towel traction in order to cope with neck pain so that I could teach my afternoon classes.

Normally, I would grade papers at night, after my son had gone to sleep, but now it took twice as long to grade them. Typing brought excruciating pain. My condition wreaked havoc on my relationship with my son, which took yet another year to repair, along with costly therapy to deal with stress and

depression.

Ironically, my workmen's compensation doctor led me to one of the most unique and effective strategies for coping with a teaching career. He referred me to an esoteric acupuncturist, whose treatments not only restored my shoulder, but transformed my ability to connect with my students.

He advised me to visualize a golden membrane surrounding my body like an egg, and a second golden membrane beyond that, between me and my students. In this way, he said, I would protect myself from my students' negative energy, in the same way that doctors need psychic protection from their patients in order not to die young. Coupled with the Dalai Lama's teachings on compassion, acupuncture opened up channels that enabled me to see teaching as more of a blessing than a job. From merely coping, I've grown to love teaching. It is a pathway into my own creative soul.

Tenure on a fault line? "Whatever," as the Valley girls say. Even if I'm not out of debt from making my film, my steady work supports my son, whose life is now a happy whirlwind of friends, art lessons, kittens and camping trips.

Teaching Hollywood screenwriting for ten years has also enabled me to structure my creative writing so that it can reach beyond the

avant-garde audience of my prior life as a film artist and poet.

Teaching assistants give my office the semblance of organization, and help me conduct research for my next book. Swimming and yoga keep my frozen shoulder at bay. The summers are inching me closer to the novels and poems of my dreams.

Note

Special acknowledgment is made to Claudia A. Limbert, Director of Academic Affairs, Penn State Dubois, who organized the Midwest Modern Language Association panel, "Strategies for Coping and Strategies for Change: Professional Renewal, Personal Renewal, and Advancement in the Lives of Academic Women," at the Midwest Modern Language Association Conference, November 7, 1998, for use of her term, "Academic Cinderellas."

Most of the time, my Prince Charming keeps me imprisoned in the Ivory tower, but I've grown to like it. My hair is growing longer, like Rapunzel's. Already, I look forward to climbing down the salt-and-pepper braids and writing full-time. But that's another story. ■

Work Cited

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