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AROUND TOWN | GERDA LERNER CELEBRATION

Around Town: Holocaust survivor Gerda Lerner 'found a home' at UW as women's studies historian

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By all accounts, Gerda Lerner was a serious scholar with a fierce intellect. She was also a trailblazing feminist, a mentor to generations of graduate students, a taskmaster, a poet, a nature lover.

A Holocaust survivor who spent her 18th birthday in a Nazi jail in Vienna waiting to die, Lerner emigrated to New York as a refugee. Her marriage to filmmaker Carl Lerner produced two children.

“Mom, thank you for sewing the merit badges on my Cub Scout uniform, and for those difficult years from 16 … until I was 56,” said Lerner’s son, Dan, getting big laughs Sunday at a memorial service that celebrated Lerner’s life and contributions.

In person, or via notes read by others, dozens of people — colleagues, former colleagues, friends, family, disciples — paid their respects to the distinguished women’s studies historian who died Jan. 2 in Madison at age 92. About 150 people attended the three-hour program in an auditorium in the UW-Madison’s Grainger Hall.

Lerner’s legacy includes two important studies on women and society: “The Creation of Patriarchy” (1986) and “The Creation of Feminist Consciousness” (1997). Her memoir, “Fireweed,” about her years before entering academia, was published in 2002 and was later adapted into a play.

All told, she wrote 11 books, and earned 18 honorary degrees.

“It’s wonderful to get honorary degrees, but for me the hood that came with the degree always also symbolized the millennium of the exclusion of women from universities,” Lerner wrote on a card displayed Sunday with a multicolored quilt at the front of the auditorium.

Learner further explained on the card that she wanted to change the patriarchal symbol into an art object that would honor a traditional craft of women. To that end, she ripped the hoods apart and enlisted a local quilter to craft a quilt from Lerner’s design that she hung on her living room wall.

It was at age 38, when her children were older, that Lerner even began college. She received her Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1966 and went on to found the women’s studies program at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y.

In 1980, following her husband’s death, she moved to UW-Madison, where she established the doctorate program in U.S. women’s history.

Linda Gordon, a New York University professor who taught women’s history at UW-Madison

with Lerner in the 1980s and 1990s, described herself as a beneficiary of Lerner's "ability to bulldoze obstacles."

Lerner also knew when to go around obstacles, Gordon said. "She was a very good strategist."

She had a toughness, an overbearingness and a persistence that Gordon compared to a dog with a bone. "She. Would. Not. Quit."

UW-Madison colleague Judy Leavitt said that Lerner put UW-Madison on the women's studies map, and made it the capital. She made it an "island of feminist strength."

Dan Lerner said his mother saved every bit of paper and documented everything she did during her lifetime. While sifting through her file cabinets after her death, he found a piece of writing that said, "the truth of being a refugee is that you can never really find a new home."

Then to his departed mother he said, "No, you are wrong. You found a home here. You made a home here."