



Region II: New York, New Jersey and Puerto Rico

Hostos Community College Professor and Coordinator of Women's Studies Option Interviewed by ICCD for the AAWCC's *Outstanding Women Leadership Series*

Jerilyn Fisher: *On Empowerment*

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Dr. Jerilyn Fisher, professor of English and coordinator of the Women's Studies Option at Hostos Community College in the Bronx, has been selected by the American Association of Women in Community Colleges, Region II, to be interviewed by the Institute for Community College Development as part of their joint "Outstanding Women Leadership" series. The AAWCC's Region II includes New York, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico. The series honors women who have made outstanding contributions to creating and broadening opportunities for women in community colleges.



The Women's Studies Option is a nine credit course of study that is transferable to four CUNY senior colleges as requirements for their majors or minors (Queens, Hunter, Lehman, and York).

Fisher believes that as a teacher it is important to blend compassion with standards that are both fair and appropriately challenging. "This is a hard line to walk," she says, "but I think many women manage to do it." Three-quarters of the students at Hostos are women, and many of the students Fisher teaches are single parents who have challenging social and economic lives. "Some ask for exceptions to be made for them, others for some kind of understanding," she says. "But sometimes what they are asking for is not quite fair to the other students who have completed work while under strain."

"It's about the line between discipline and unleashed passion," she says. When asked if holding on to integrity becomes more of an issue as women move up the leadership ladder, Fisher replies, "Yes, especially when you have more responsibility for guiding people other than yourself."

Fisher is a life-long learner, bringing with her life's lessons and inspirations from past experiences. She is inspired by the prospect that each day is a chance to empower others, which in turn empowers her. "I enjoy helping people connect with their strengths," she says. "Acknowledging a weakness or limitation and making sense of it, perhaps learning from it, helps us to be better people in whatever we want to accomplish."

Sometimes making the right decision isn't easy. "I am very consultative in both my personal and professional lives," she says. "If something happens and I feel unsure of myself, it doesn't take me thirty seconds to reach out and ask somebody to help me think it through--

either for practical advice or just to tell me what they are hearing me say as I struggle for clearer vision.”

Fisher has co-edited a collection of feminist essays that look at fiction with psychological theories of women’s development in mind. Her own essay in that collection (co-authored) is entitled “Fairy Tales, Feminist Theory and the Lives of Women and Girls.” About Grimm’s tales, Fisher says, “These portraits of mothers and daughters don’t reflect very well the reality of girls’ lives.” At the end of each tale, the girl is either alone with the prince or alone with her father and brother. All the adult women are gone. So, the message in the tales expresses the view that girls don’t need their mothers—or any extant female role model—very much.

“The women who are portrayed as evil step-mothers use deceptive means to try to get their aims achieved,” she says, “which is what one has to do if one cannot use the regular channels of power to get things done. What lessons about women and ambition, or women and power, are girls learning from these characters who have no choice really but to lie and deceive?” According to Fisher, research shows that mothers are very important to adolescent girls’ development and that these relationships are not nearly as negative as popular psychology or certainly Grimm’s fairy tales portray. In the media, especially, the mother-teenage daughter bond gets a bad rap. Sadly, exposure to this misconception can detract from girls’ perception of their mothers as sources of support and guidance.

On the day of Fisher’s fiftieth birthday, after years of persistence, passion, and struggle, the Women’s Studies Option, supported by Provost Cocco de Filippis, was accepted by the Hostos’ College Senate. “Women’s Studies and feminist education is my life’s work,” states Fisher. Impacting both the personal and professional lives of many women, the Women’s Studies Option extends the AAWCC’s mission of changing women’s lives through leadership and education. “I felt so strongly that this college in the south Bronx should have this program. There are women here who have never had access to some of the ways of thinking and tools of analysis that feminist theory and women’s studies provide. I wanted to give them texts and critical thinking questions that would be helpful and stimulating, and not just abstract knowledge, but something immediate in its usefulness.”

Fisher’s hope for women is that they can find their passion and a way to live it. “For women, in particular, it’s so easy to lose sight of what is important to us and who we are as independent, autonomous, and worthy human beings. We lose sight of all that under the pressure of trying to maintain all the different roles we are supposed to be good at – partners, parents, family members, caregivers, workers. It’s easy to lose sight of what really defines us as women, what we want to have define us, and the principles we want to live by.”

She pauses. “My message to women is to try to really listen to yourself, to pay attention to the small thoughts, to assign value to the meaningful moments and the attendant feelings, so you can build a sense of who you are that is not chameleon-like in relation to men, not ‘helpless before the iron,’ the evocative last lines from Tillie Olsen’s short story, but instead a sense of self that is coherent, vibrant and steady.

Interview by Lee Riddell

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