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Patricia J. Keller, 1923-2007: 'Brilliant pioneer' in dentistry, oral biology at UW

By CASEY MCNERTHNEY
P-I REPORTER

The University of Washington didn't host a party July 1, 1967 -- the day Dr. Patricia J. Keller became the first female professor in the School of Dentistry.

But the Michigan native continued to break glass, promoted as the associate dean of the graduate school and as the first chairwoman of the oral biology department. She became one of the field's most renowned researchers.

On the eve of her Wednesday funeral Mass, former colleagues and her modern-day successors said Keller was nothing less than a brilliant pioneer.

The woman who was recruited to Seattle in 1954, returned to the Wolverine State earlier this year, wanting to be with her three sisters for her final days. Keller died April 1. She was 83.

She attended the University of Detroit and in 1945 graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in chemistry. Between travels, Keller worked as a technician at the Detroit Institute for Cancer Research. Her professors told her to research whatever interested her and encouraged her to attend Washington University in St. Louis, where she studied under Nobel Prize winner Dr. Gerty Cori.

After her 1953 graduation from the University of Detroit and a postdoctoral fellowship at Washington, Keller's family said she was sought by Dr. Hans Neurath -- the UW's first biochemistry department chairman -- to help foster an atmosphere for academic research, for which the medical school is now renowned.

She was the only female research instructor in the biochemistry department when she was hired in 1955, said Dr. Murray Robinovitch, who succeeded her as oral biology department chairman in 1982.

"She fought for what she knew and what she was entitled to as a scientist who did quality work," said Dr. Beverly Dale-Crunk, one of 14 female faculty members listed in the University of Washington's oral biology department.

Keller's research dealt with digestive enzymes, which are secreted by the salivary glands and the pancreas. Some of the studies she produced determined how enzymes are made, and if those secreted by glands are identical. Keller loved finding how enzymes are made.

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"She was very important to me as a role model," Dale-Crunk said. "I feel in many ways that I followed in her footsteps both as a biochemist and also by fostering development of students and young people in their careers."

Keller, who lived in Kirkland for years, told family she found joy in engaging students with one-on-one instruction, because it was a Dominican nun who realized her talent and pushed her to pursue a science career. Keller never married and had no children, but was devoted to more than a dozen nieces and nephews, her niece said.

"She was a very bright biochemist," Robinovitch said, "and a remarkable woman."

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