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A Powerful Vine: My Memories of Isabel Marcus

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“Sobbing and breathless, I ran until the crowd thinned out. I was close to the dormitory. I went to my room and lay still for half an hour. I recalled scenes from my own graduate school days in Berkeley in the sixties. Running from the police and the National Guard, a wet bandana across my nose and mouth to ward off the tear gas, was a different experience. Perhaps because it was my own turf and I could communicate with the people around me. Perhaps because I did not assume that the occupiers would use live ammunition. On later reflection it was this latter point that was so crucial. Were I a person of color in the United States I might not have made the same assumptions.”

—Isabel Marcus, *Report from China*, CLS (1989)

This vivid account of how our UB Law School colleague, the late Isabel Marcus, experienced the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests fuses a lifetime of social justice struggles and concerns: an activist since her law school days at Berkeley, a scholar of and a fighter for women’s rights and reproductive

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freedom, a fearless traveler in central and eastern Europe, and here, into the heart of Chinese student protests.

I was privileged to know Isabel in intertwined personal and professional ways. When my husband, Professor Jim Bono, and myself first came to Buffalo in 1984 she had arrived just two years previously from the University of Texas at Austin. But she had already made her Parkside home distinctively her own, enrolling her two children in city public schools, furnishing the sweeping downstairs with books, protest posters, gorgeous Eurasian textiles from her travels, and Breuer chairs, and, several years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, making it a refuge for visiting Polish scholars. Getting ready to downsize as her children went off to college, she sold the house to us, and we followed her lead in calming the colors, renovating the kitchen, punching up the wall art, spreading out the books, cultivating the garden, welcoming visitors, and sending our older son to City Honors.

Isabel was among an interdisciplinary group of powerful second-wave feminist scholars at UB—Liz Kennedy of Women's Studies, Claire Kahane of English, Carolyn Korsmeyer of Philosophy, Ellen DuBois and Liz Weston of History, Carol Zemel of Art History, Ruth Meyerowitz of American Studies, Lois Weis of Education, Pat Shelley of Social Work, Diane Bennett and Lucinda Finley of Law, Regina Grol of Polish Studies—who welcomed me warmly into their reading and discussion circles. She travelled with many of them behind the former Iron Curtain to establish joint programs at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, and to visit the Holocaust sites of their parents' generation. She took every opportunity she could to travel and to teach abroad—in Poland, Romania, Macedonia, Russia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Slovakia, Georgia, China, India, Pakistan, and Thailand—pioneering the understanding of domestic violence as a form of terrorism, and opening a rich avenue for students and faculty from Eastern Europe to come here to study at UB.

At first Isabel moved to a lovely row house on Mariner

Street in Allentown, where she continued to reserve a charming upstairs apartment for visiting scholars. But soon she took the aerie penthouse apartment on the northwest corner of the Campanile overlooking downtown, where the elevator rose right into the rooms and she could leave for her travels with a turn of the key. Many of us visited her there in all weather, in summer enjoying her terrace, in winter reveling in the warmth of her hospitality and the still-gorgeous view. She was an intellectual homemaker: always welcoming, always rigorous.

In 1997 the UB Graduate Group for Feminist Studies and a long-standing group of activist women from the Medical School and sciences combined, under the partial impetus of the 1996 “President’s Task Force of Women at UB,” to form the UB Institute for Research and Education on Women and Gender (IREWG, or informally the Gender Institute), and Isabel, together with Peggy Acara from the Medical School, became one of its first Co-Directors. Under their leadership the Institute built out a strong base of campus-wide involvement as well as support for the academic Program in Women’s Studies and sponsored, in addition to graduate student and faculty development events, an annual campus-wide fall “Gender Week” and a city-based spring “International Women’s Film Festival.” Isabel delighted in the breadth, variety, and vigor of this programming, which brought international figures like Native American activist and American Vice-Presidential candidate Winona LaDuke to campus. I chaired “Gender Week” for a number of years, and one particularly vivid example from that time was the semester when Isabel and I worked with noted local theater practitioner Darleen Pickering Hummert and her activist troupe at Theatre for Change to write, cast, and direct a play on the threat of sexual harassment in the college workplace, “A Matter of Respect,” which we put on for several well-attended performances at the Katharine Cornell Theater at the UB North Campus. From 2003 to 2006 I succeeded Isabel as Co-

Director of the Gender Institute. It was a sign of her sustaining kindness that she gave me a basket of self-care items—a notebook, gift cards, fragrance, lotion—and threw a party for me going into the challenge; but it is a testimony to her activist and intellectual legacy that we continued her initiatives strongly and under a succession of strong Directors have expanded the Gender Institute’s reach and influence so that it continues to thrive today.

Isabel was a breast cancer survivor, but the illness barely slowed her down. When the Gender Institute threw her a party a couple of years ago she appeared in her signature black leather jacket, looking tough and fit, and pre-COVID she resumed her travels. It was a shock to learn that Alzheimer’s had stricken her rapidly and that her devoted children had moved her to memory care in California, where many of us wrote to her but she declined rapidly. I still live in her house, and so I still think of her every day. One of the things she did there was plant three trumpeter vines along the ugly chain link fence on one side of the yard. I’ve fostered and spliced those trumpeter vines so that they now hide the fence and are covered with orange blossoms throughout the summer. But in the winter they are bare, and their trunks are now as thick and twisted as the power salute on the Habermas poster Isabel hung on our dining room wall. I think of her when I see them—I salute her.