

The Spectrum Online

Barbara Wejnert

April 28th, 2008

ASHLEY OTTO - Staff Writer

In the late 1970s, a college cyclist in communist Poland biked to the border of East Germany only to be sent back by bus, bike and all.

Barbara Wejnert, associate professor and chair of the Department of Global Gender Studies at UB, was born and raised in communist Poland. Wejnert continued the majority of her higher education in her mother country at the Mickiewicz University in Poznan.

As an avid cyclist, she traveled throughout Eastern and Western Europe on her bike during her youth. She fondly remembers the destinations her university's cyclist student group would ride to, and the celebrations afterwards that thousands would attend almost every weekend.

"Actually, the education was very intense, but with it was also provided a fun leisure time," Wejnert said. "I loved college."

Wejnert was also an active member of the undergraduate student organization that worked with the United Nations (UN).

A defining time for Wejnert came during her sophomore year when Poland hosted an annual UN conference in which she won the student paper competition. She had written about changing the negative stereotypes between nations in children's textbooks as a means to build peace, which was published by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in Paris.

"It was very incredible for me, it was fun, but then I realized that I really loved this work," Wejnert said.

By the 1980s, communist Poland was being weakened by the strength of the solidarity movement. Polish students wanted to break away from the constraints of communist ideology that was forced upon the country. Universities held strikes, debates and protests.

Among the students in this particular arena of political turmoil was Wejnert, who was in the process of gathering live data for her dissertation on the movement.

"When the student solidarity movement took place, I was already in grad school. I decided to take part in [the movement]," Wejnert said. "I was a student in the solidarity movement who did her research on the movement at the same time it was happening."

Very few had first-hand material on student involvement in solidarity, making Wejnert's work unique. Yet it could not be published in Poland for political reasons.

After graduating with a master's degree in sociology of family and gender and a Ph.D. in political and economic sociology, Wejnert went to the University of Florida in 1987 as an assistant professor of sociology. There she spent a year as an assistant professor before moving to the sociology department at Georgia Southern University.

In 1994, Wejnert moved to Cornell University and became an associate professor for their department of sociology. She enjoyed a decade at Cornell, where she worked with both the sociological and international studies departments.

As Wejnert researched democratization and its benefits, she found that women were being left out. She became interested in the quality of life with respect to gender in new democracies.

"When I was working on democratization and looking at the benefit of democracy [for] the nation and the people, I realized that the benefits of democratization for women was much less than for men," Wejnert said.

Although Wejnert still believes democracy to be the best political system to date, her belief is that there are security measures and policies that can protect the vulnerable groups in a free society.

"There is a lot of work to be done," Wejnert said. "If it isn't shown in research,

nothing will be done."

Wejnert came to UB with the idea of modifying the women's studies and taking a more global approach to gender. The Department of Global Gender Studies now focuses on analyzing three areas of study: cultures and identities, women and global citizenship, and gender and public policy.

"It's important to be at the place that is growing and developing...I always cherish that," Wejnert said. "There are many schools in and out of the country that are stagnant and I feel that UB is on the way to development. The positive energy is here."

Wejnert has never lost her love of teaching. She currently teaches four seminars in which she focuses on the relationship between democratic trends and gender relations in the world.

"I love teaching because it's a joy to interact with students who actually can make a change in perspective," Wejnert said.

Wejnert, who attributes her successes to a positive outlook on life, good humor, and not taking rejection personally, has an impressive track record of journal and book publications.

She has written over four books, two of which she is the sole author for, including her book "Transition to Democracy in Eastern Europe and Russia: Impact on Economy, Politics and Culture," published by Greenwood Press in 2002.

Published this year is her co-authored book "Safe Motherhood in Globalized World," and she is currently working on two more works titled "Diffusion of Democracy" and "Gender, Health and Global Development."

Reflecting on her peer-reviewed journal publications, of which there are many, her more memorable papers include her award-winning paper "Diffusion, Development and Democracy, 1800-1999" in the American Sociological Review in 2005.

In 2007, Wejnert proudly contributed to the Web interactive database ICPSR (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research) with a collection of 187 assessed sovereign countries from 1800 to 2005.

Although she grew up in a household of women, her family is one of all men. Her husband and five children enjoy traveling and listening to music.

<http://spectrum.buffalo.edu/article.php?id=36817>

Content © 2009 - The Spectrum Student Periodical, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Phone: 716.645.2468 Fax: 716.645.2766