PROFILE BARBARA GITENSTEIN, The College of New Jersey

TCNJ’s President Gitenstein Retires on June 30 – Her Legacy of Mentorship and Transformation Remains

RBG, initials most closely associated with the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, aka the “Notorious RBG,” are the initials of another dynamic female leader and mentor, less notorious, but also renowned and highly regarded in her field.

R. Barbara Gitenstein has presided over an academic court for the past two decades as president of The College of New Jersey. Retiring from her post on June 30, Dr. Gitenstein was appointed in 1999 and became the college’s first female president. Among the many words of praise describing Dr. Gitenstein, two words stand out as themes in her professional and personal life: transformation and mentoring.

Dr. Gitenstein’s personal journey that transported her to a position where she could have a transformational and mentoring role on the nation’s higher education stage began with her birth – at home (her mom never made it to the hospital) – in Florala, Alabama. A town of 2,000 residents, Florala had two Jewish families – one of whom was the Gitenstein family.

“My mother and father were New Yorkers (Manhattan), who ended up in Alabama, because it offered a possibility of success for my father’s shirt manufacturing business. My grandfather’s shirt manufacturing business went bankrupt during the Depression. My father at the age of 17 was incredibly courageous and determined to make it – and left New York for a new life .... My father Seymour Gitenstein was an extraordinary business man and manager, I never took a business course. He was my business mentor – I learned my management skills from my father who had over 1,000 employees.”

Learning from her father’s success was the positive aspect of living in Florala, Alabama. The negative was the fact that “living there for us was not very comfortable, we were different,” she said. “In addition to being Jewish, we were not Southern, we were total Yankees.” But her dad continued to set an example of perseverance and a socially progressive ethos, because even when with his being different he became a leader in the community. “He was the chair of the local board of education during the school integration of the schools. There was no violence – he managed the conflict,” said Dr. Gitenstein.
But the local schools were not accredited, so her parents sent her to a private, all-girls’ boarding school, Holton-Arms, for her high school education. “I was always a serious academic. It was a hard, scary, and often lonely experience, but it did provide good opportunity to see women in leadership roles,” said Dr. Gitenstein, who also looked to her maternal grandmother, Pauline Keller Green, as an example of someone who with dignity and grit navigated some very hard times.

While in high school, Dr. Gitenstein was sure that she would pursue a career in music as a vocalist – a dramatic soprano. When she failed to get accepted to a music conservatory, she had the rude awakening that she had a “good voice, but not great.” She attended Duke University, fell in love with English, while still enjoying music both as a performer and an audience member. “My experience as a performer proved useful to me when I became a college president,” said Dr. Gitenstein, who has greatly enjoyed the programming emanating from TCNJ’s acclaimed music department.

Dr. Gitenstein received a BA with honors in English from Duke University and a PhD in English and American Literature from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She was an English professor, but gravitated towards administration and was appointed to the position of provost at Drake University before the TCNJ opportunity presented itself.

“I was very happy being a faculty member, teacher, researcher, writer (she has written the book *Apocalyptic Messianism* and *Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry* and several articles on American Literature). But I always thought about the importance of the holistic functioning of the higher education institution. I saw how important it was to have strong administrative leadership interested in and working for the quality and excellence of the institution as a whole, not just as a place to house talented faculty members with individual goals … I was interested in public higher education and offended by the assumption that public colleges and universities were incapable of being of the highest quality with standards of excellence equal to the best private colleges.”

Upon her arrival at TCNJ in 1999, Dr. Gitenstein immediately set about enhancing academic rigor and faculty-student engagement, which led to a transformation of the entire undergraduate program. Delivering the highest caliber academic experience has been a consistent theme of her presidency, which is paying dividends for students of the college. The high number who graduate on time, for example, has led to TCNJ being ranked 6th in the nation among all public colleges and universities for having the highest four-year graduation rate. In 2006, TCNJ was awarded a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, an honor shared by fewer than 10 percent of colleges and universities nationally.

TCNJ has experienced much success throughout Dr. Gitenstein’s tenure, but the accomplishment which she believes set the foundation for much that followed is the transformation of the academic program that took place early in her presidency and positioned the college as an exemplar in public higher education.
The changes aimed to deliver an education of the highest quality, the kind most commonly associated with the top private colleges. Central to the experience was the opportunity for students of all disciplines to conduct mentored research with faculty. It also exemplified the kind of decision-making that marked her administration – collaborative and aspirational.

“We sought to reinforce the relationship between faculty and students,” said Dr. Gitenstein. “Through the transformation, our faculty thought deeply about their research and how they could engage students in it so that students could learn by serving as junior colleagues while conducting research.”

In the past two decades, TCNJ has realized a significant increase in non-state revenue, including approximately $20 million in federal grant and set-aside revenue. Alumni giving has nearly doubled, the college’s endowment has $4.5 million to $53 million, and TCNJ received its largest ever single gift: $6.6 million. Utilizing the public-private partnership provision contained in the New Jersey Economic Stimulus Act of 2009, Dr. Gitenstein completed a contract for Campus Town, the college’s first public-private partnership with a developer. The project, which was built with $120 million in private funds, will generate close to $50 million in income to the college over the 50-year life of the contract. It created more than 350,000 square feet comprising amenities such as retail stores, professional services and restaurants for both the college and local communities, and housing for 612 students.

Under Dr. Gitenstein’s leadership, more than $360 million has been invested in its physical plant. Improvements include six academic buildings, housing for an additional 400 students, and the acquisition of more property to add to the central campus of 289 acres. In 2017, three of the major projects were completed: a 89,000 square foot STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) building; a 26,300 square foot addition to the chemistry building; and a $38 million renovation of the Brower Student Center. The Building Our Futures Bond Act contributed $40 million to the financing of the STEM building and chemistry building, and the Brower Student Center was funded in part by Sodexo Campus Services, the colleges food service provider.

President Gitenstein delivered her 2018 Commencement Address reflecting the power of the words “transformation” and “mentoring.”

As members of the class of 2018 you have been challenged both academically and personally. You have had to face confrontation and engage in difficult conversations, as much as the world has. As future leaders, I challenge you to be stewards of civility in the face of disagreement. Advocacy is not merely to have your say; it is to accomplish change – that requires speaking and listening, commitment and flexibility, pride and humility. I hope that we can count on you to continue to be passionate, tireless and dedicated to causes larger than yourselves, causes that can change our nation and the world for the better.
Advocacy also depends on mentorship. Choose those who are truly great to lead you. They are not necessarily the ones with the titles or the ones with the wealth. They are the ones who speak to your values, who sacrifice their ease to make a difference in the world. They are also the ones who challenge you both to be courageous and to accept responsibility for our future and your own actions.

The twentieth century poet Stephen Spender penned a magnificent description of these kinds of mentors. He wrote:

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history
Through corridors of light, where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing ....

....
Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,
See how these names are feted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire’s centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

These mentors are heroes not because of physical strength or because of position; they are heroes because they cared for something larger than themselves, because they fought with honor and grace to change the world for the better, because they loved humanity in all its complexity and grandeur.

Graduates, as you enter this new phase, I wish for you a life of promise and influence, and the courage to base decisions on your convictions, guided by both your heart and your mind and in keeping with those who “left the vivid air signed with their honour.”

Even though she will be leaving TCNJ, President RBG, like the Supreme Court Justice RBG, has no intention of ever retiring from contributing to the causes about which she feels so passionately. Dr. Gitenstein looks forward to being able to spend more time with her family, especially her husband, Dr. Donald Hart, her two grown children, and her granddaughter, but she will continue to be involved in shaping higher education in this country. She will join AGB Consulting, a Washington, DC-based firm specializing in assisting universities and their governing boards navigate challenges and more effectively lead their institutions.

“I look forward to being able to think about higher education from a global perspective instead of an individual institutional perspective,” she said. “This new role will allow me to continue to contribute to an industry that I believe is the pride of our nation.”
The final words of wisdom in her commencement address are advice to the graduates and an indication of how a transformational mentor has lived her life.

*Know that your ability to revel in joy and overcome hardship and your mature acceptance of consequences of action will stand you in good stead, well into the future.*