

Remembering Barbara DeGenevieve

One student's reflections on the artist, mentor, and leader in the SAIC community and beyond.

✍ By [Henry Harris](#) 🕒 September 2, 2014 📁 [SAIC](#)

Five months ago, an unusually large group of photo students squeezed into room 215, a small, windowless classroom in the Columbus Drive building. About forty undergrads and a handful of IRFM staff members surrounded a bank of Lista worktables that would later hold several steaming boxes of special-order thin crust pizza. This congregation of students had been a long time coming, with frequent emails and posters around the photo lab. These notifications for the student meeting entreated viewers through bold type words like "YOU NEED TO BE THERE" and "PIZZA" in all capital letters. The notifications would be sent out, each one calling attention to the even closer meeting date until finally, a bold-type "tomorrow" was in the first line of the message.

Sure enough, the day arrived and students who'd received the word gathered within 215. Barbara DeGenevieve waited within, the grand emcee and email writer. She managed a stack of papers and notebook while donning a turquoise-purple skirt and similarly colored wig. The attendance for the meeting was overwhelming, though of course, it was mandatory. Still, the undergrads turned out, condensing like water out of thin air, the way SAIC students often do. They filed in gradually, all under the care of a great rainmaker who waited with glee for the flood.



Photograph by Shandi Hass

Over the course of the next ninety minutes, Barbara worked through a short meeting agenda, bringing up topics of urgency and concern that she had caught wind of. She opened the matter at hand up to the students who would volley around the classroom while she nodded attentively and took notes. "Access." "Authorizations." "Sophomore seminar." "Spine classes." As it often does, the conversation grew tedious and sticky, yet Barbara asked more questions, pushed the topics further, delved into the nitty-gritty.

That was part of Barbara's style – she was a stalwart when it came to the difficult and messy, unafraid of traversing the terra incognita of school policy and administration while also posing questions of authority, gender, and race through her practice as a teacher and artist. This was exemplary of her rare brand of commitment, evident in even the smallest ways. During her appointment as chair in the photo department, she put her office right in the thick of photo classrooms and studios in the Columbus building, making herself accessible and present.

Additionally, Barbara closely and tirelessly mentored many, many students and faculty members. She attempted to break barriers while at the same time raising hoops for colleagues and protégés alike to jump through, often times jumping through them herself. Her incessant questioning of issues such as sexuality, power, and relationships found within her own oeuvre became useful fodder for students grappling with similar topics. Her influence and assistance was far reaching and felt by many.

Toward the meeting's close, the pizza that had been so heavily prophesied in the emails was far from being finished. Plans for future meetings started circulating. Barbara looked around the room and asked, "Is this the best time?" Everyone nodded, of course knowing full well that for them, Tuesday at 4:30 p.m. was most convenient. It was at least, one of the best times.

Barbara DeGenevieve passed away on August 9, 2014, after a long battle with cancer, leaving behind an immense and vital body of work, a legacy of leadership, as well as a lasting impression on several generations of artists that had the privilege of working alongside her. It is through these imprints that Barbara's spirit continues.

A memorial event will be held to remember and celebrate the remarkable life and work of Barbara DeGenevieve on October 2, 2014 from 4:00–6:00 p.m. in the SAIC Ballroom, 112 South Michigan Avenue. Friends, family, students, and colleagues will gather to share thoughts and recollections of Barbara and raise a glass in her honor. An open mic will follow.