



*(l to r) Tara Tull, AnnJanette Alejano-Steele and Kumella Aiu. Guidance from the women's institute helped Aiu turn her life around.*

# The Power of Togetherness

Metro State's Institute for Women's Studies and Services harnesses energy and community

By Roxanne Hawn

Some women seeking help at 1033 Ninth Street Park face what may seem to be an insurmountable number of challenges, not tidy, self-contained problems. Academics, parenting, health, domestic violence and financial worries sometimes collide in the lives of those who come to Metro State's Institute for Women's Studies and Services. Sadly, that's life. It's also a clear indicator why the theory and practice of women's studies requires an interdisciplinary approach that engages in critical dialogue and advocates for social justice. It's a need that remains as important today as when the women's movement first took hold.

"We're not there yet," says AnnJanette (A.J.) Alejano-Steele, director of the institute and an associate professor of psychology and women's studies. "One huge misconception is that we're already there in terms of equal opportunity and equal rights. (People think) it's that 'chick thing' from the 60s, that the work is done ... There are all these assumptions that we're there, and we're not."

For example, most people think the Equal Rights Amendment passed. It didn't. Many also believe that the United States signed a United Nations' human rights convention aimed at ending discrimination against women worldwide. That's also not the case.

"When you look at women's studies or women's issues, there's an inherent complexity," says Alejano-Steele, who does a lot of work against human trafficking. "There are these other intersecting identities. We're talking about class. We're talking about race. We're talking about sexual orientation. We're talking about disability. This interdisciplinary basket of lenses is what we afford you with a women's studies education. It allows you to be a social critic. It allows you to look through these different

lenses at these different forms of oppression and privilege that inform all our lives."

Men sometimes ask permission to take women's studies classes. They also knock on the institute's door and ask if it's OK to come inside. The answers are "of course" and "please do." No one, student or not, woman or not, is turned away. Trends in women's studies now encompass all kinds of gender issues, including those of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) communities.

This background in diversity helps women's studies alumna Ruby Purdy ('07) in her job as a case manager at Samaritan House, a homeless shelter in Denver. "It really gives you a different perspective to realize we can draw so much strength from our differences," she says.

A former firefighter, Purdy now helps people in other forms of crisis. The homeless shelter acts like an emergency room for society's ills. And, the problems aren't all local. Currently, much of Purdy's work focuses on getting veterans reintegrated into communities. While most of her cases come from the Vietnam era, Purdy says the shelter is bracing to help veterans from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because her academic focus was on the plight of women internationally, Purdy also brings a world-citizen view to her work with these veterans.

## Hand in hand

Founded in 1985 and directed for 20 years by Jodi Wetzel, professor emeritus of history and women's studies (see "On Legacy and Grandkids," page 12), the institute forged a brilliant but uncommon link between the academics of women's studies and the services of a women's center. It's not just unusual in Colorado but nationwide.

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# "truly life changing"

## Reflections on feminism

Younger students sometimes bristle at the word. To them it embodies old stereotypes that have no bearing on their reality. Many believe that you have to be a feminist to do well in women's studies courses, which is simply not true. Rather, ideologies get debated, more like in a seminary.

When AnnJanette (A.J.) Alejano-Steele, director of Metro State's Institute for Women's Studies and Services, addresses this topic in the classroom, here's what she says: "Regardless of where you are with your own identity as a feminist, we have those feminists, those 'man-hating lesbians,' to thank to allow me to be standing here in front of your class or to allow half this class to even be here."

Ultimately, feminism simply means believing in the equality of men and women.

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## A Women's Study Primer

Want to learn more? Here's a list of recommended reading:

- *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde and Cheryl Clark
- *Feminism is for Everyone: Passionate Politics* by Bell Hooks
- *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* by Jennifer Baumgardner, Amy Richards and Winona LaDuke
- *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* by Cherrie Moraga, Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman
- *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* by Incite! Women of Colorado Against Violence
- *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms* by Chilla Bulbeck

Tara Tull, associate director of the institute, says national women's studies conferences always host two tracks, one for academic department heads and one for those who handle women's services. "There is always a discussion group among services people on how to collaborate with women's studies and how difficult it is for them because they don't have an automatic connection," Tull explains.

On other campuses, women's services are housed with administration, not hand in hand with the academic department. Where others might complain about getting access to faculty, Tull doesn't. Many people assume she is faculty, which admittedly opens doors.

At Metro State's institute, rather than compete for resources, education teams with services. It's not us versus them, faculty versus

administration, or academics versus services. They're in it together.

That genuine closeness shows. Kumella Aiu looked for help at two other local universities when she decided to return to college. Divorced with three young daughters, Aiu was laid off from her post-marriage job. A former lei business owner, who co-founded a local nonprofit, Aiu had good experience, but the doors she wanted to open next all required a higher degree. She needed ideas on being a full-time student and a single mom at the same time.

Aiu says, "I went to all of the different offices I could find (at other schools), trying to figure out how I was going to pull this together and I had the warmest welcome here."

Thanks to Tull's insights, including getting scholarships and other financial aid, Aiu started

## On Legacy and Grandkids

When former Dean Larry Johnson decided to found a women's institute at Metro State, he recruited Jodi Wetzel, who was teaching women's studies at the University of Maine at the time. "He chased me down and hired me," Wetzel laughs.

It was Wetzel's plan to link academics and services together in one institute. Even though it's still considered cutting-edge more than 20 years later, Wetzel says simply, "I just thought it was a good idea."

Wetzel points to external awards the institute has received as confirmation of their efforts. She also loved developing the Outstanding Women Awards the institute gave to faculty, students, alumni and campus staff members, whom she says "really pushed for us." In particular, she's proud to honor slain faculty member Pamela McIntyre-Marcum with a scholarship in her name. McIntyre-Marcum was a Metro State marketing professor who was killed by her husband in 1987.

Wetzel, who retired in 2005, believes the institute's future is bright. "A.J. Alejano-Steele is now running it, and she is just dynamite," Wetzel says. "I have no worries about what's going to happen to the institute. I think it will probably grow because she is really good."

So, Wetzel is perfectly happy to enjoy her retirement, which means, in a word, grandkids. "We have only two now, but who knows how many more we'll get," she says.



It's all about the grandkids now for Jodi Wetzel, her first grandchild.

at Metro State in fall 2007. With her existing associate's degree from a community college in Hawaii, she is on track to finish her undergraduate degree in two years. Aiu received so much aid that she doesn't have to work, but when the institute had a job opening, she took it.

"I knew that this office and these amazing women, and the support and experience I would get from being here, was much more important to me than having the extra time to study, or the money."

Stunned friends often ask Aiu how she turned her life around, how things got so much better. She tells them, "I don't know, but it did. I did the right things at the right time with guidance from this office."

This leadership learned on campus carries over into the Denver community at large. Kimberlee Jones ('06), another women's studies and nonprofit administration alumna, calls the institute "truly life changing." Jones sees her place in the world as a feminist and advocate in her work at Project Safeguard, which provides legal advocacy for victims of domestic violence. A survivor of such oppression herself, Jones raises funds and teaches attorneys and judges how to view women in these situations more fairly. "Part B of my mission," she says, "is to create awareness about how many perpetrators are really gaining custody of these children when women try to leave abusive relationships ... It looks like these women are falling apart."

The abusers, on the other hand, look financially stable and in control despite any criminal charges that might be pending. With lawyers of their own, these perpetrators often win.

Project Safeguard hopes to change that by providing free clinics to help women better navigate divorce and other legal proceedings, including filing for protective orders. Plus, Jones adds, "We have advocates in all the courthouses, and we are with them through every piece of the legal process."

### On the horizon

Staff at the institute call 2008 and beyond "an exciting time." Alejano-Steele and her team spent much of her first year as director sorting through things, literally and mentally. In fall 2007, they finished writing a strategic plan.

Alejano-Steele says that the transition following several retirements, including Wetzel's, is done. New projects are on the horizon.

A three-pronged social entrepreneurship project, for example, will teach students how to apply the usual business school ideas to effect social change. A core course will include faculty team members from women's studies, economics and nonprofit administration. An additional service-learning course will put students into the community. A leadership speaker's series will round out the project. Those events have begun this spring 2008, with courses starting in fall of this year.

"We're also in discussion with GLBT Services about a minor," Alejano-Steele says, "which would fall nicely with our direction toward gender and social justice."

Institute staff will again pursue the long-awaited formal women's studies major. Currently, students wanting to major do so through the College's Individualized Degree Program (IDP). The women's studies major almost got approved once, but just as all the application work wrapped up, the rules changed, which meant starting over.

A women's studies major would be interdisciplinary, drawing in experts from other areas such as psychology, history, literature, criminal justice. That's how interdisciplinary tracks form into full majors.

By spreading the network and collaborating, the team achieves its goals and maintains its sanity. In fact, the institute's strategic plan includes the following value statement on sustainability: "We value maintaining goals and work loads that are manageable as well as long-lasting. We strive to demonstrate healthy boundaries at the institute and in the classroom."

And, that's key because every single issue in the world or on campus can easily be pegged as a women's issue, from reproductive rights to get-out-the-vote efforts. Alejano-Steele and Tull deflect requests to be on committees



*Ruby Purdy is preparing to help veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who are homeless.*

and task forces or to take on new projects practically every day. With limited staff and time, and endless demands, they simply cannot do everything. Instead, they model behavior where you don't have to be superhuman and run yourself into the ground to get things done.

"If we're going to be effective in talking about these issues and talking about inequalities and what-not," Alejano-Steele says, "we have to be there for the long haul."

In practice that can mean making sure teammates eat right, take a break or get help with sick kids in the middle of a busy day. Aiu says this community effort extends to women across campus, into the Denver community and with graduates well beyond boundaries of campus and time. She says, "I can't imagine leaving Metro and not having connections."