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Aptheker wows women at forum

by Heather Tirado Gilligan



UCSC Professor Bettina Aptheker at last week's talk in San Francisco. Photo: Jane Philomen Cleland

A crowd of women, young and old, packed the rooftop garden of the Pacific Institute to hear feminist scholar Bettina Aptheker speak about women and aging last week.

Aptheker spoke Thursday evening, May 8, in Hayes Valley as part of an ongoing effort to educate the public about aging and caring for loved ones as they grow older, said Doris Bersing, CEO of the institute.

The Pacific Institute is devoted to providing holistic health care to the elderly, as well as training caregivers and the general public about aging and caring for elderly loved ones, Bersing explained.

A longtime, popular professor of feminist studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Aptheker, 64, held the audience's rapt attention for the nearly one and a half hours that she spoke about the difficulties particular to aging women.

Aptheker described how women face significantly less financial security than men as they age. In part, this is because most women spend much of their lives caring for children and the elders in their families, she said. Women are more likely to work part-time or not work outside of the home because of their role as caretakers. They make 70 cents to the dollar of what men earn when they do work. And women who divorce find their household incomes drop by an average of 70 percent, Aptheker said, while men's income tends to increase after divorce.

Because of these factors, women often don't amass savings at the same rate as men. Seventy percent of elderly living below the poverty line are women, Aptheker explained.

"By the time you reach 65, it adds up," Aptheker said. "That's why you have to have an organized movement," she added.

Aptheker also criticized the marginalization of women as they age. "When you are older, you are either invisible or you are in the way," Aptheker said, a smattering of affirmative applause following her remark.

Aging women are frequently diminished in social exchanges, Aptheker said, noting that her students often describe her as "cute," and tell her "you remind me of my grandmother." "I am

not cute. That's just insulting," said Aptheker, a leader of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley in the 1960s and a civil rights, feminist, and lesbian activist of 40 years.

Throughout her lecture, Aptheker read a number of poems aimed at dispelling the idea that women cease to matter once they no longer meet the social criteria for physical beauty. Her selections included "Appearances Can Be Deceiving," by Lilith Lynn Rogers, a sensual description of two middle-aged women silently having breakfast together after energetic morning sex. The poem gently mocked people who automatically see older women as sexless spinsters.

"I'm looking out at you, and you're beautiful," Aptheker said. "Even the men," she added, laughing.

Though Aptheker delivered the lecture in part to support the publication of her 2006 memoir, *Intimate Politics*, she steered away from the controversial aspects of her book in her talk. In *Intimate Politics*, she describes sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Herbert Aptheker, the noted Marxist historian and former president of the communist party in America, stunning the many admirers of his academic and political work. He died in 2003.

Instead, Aptheker focused on her mother at the end of her talk, describing her death in 1999 at the age of 94. Fay Aptheker was a longtime radical, persecuted during the McCarthy era for her membership in the communist party. After a debilitating illness left her mother unable to breathe on her own, Aptheker decided, along with her father, to remove her mother from life support.

Aptheker explained that her mother had come to terms with aging in the last two decades in her life after mourning her lost youth for the first years of her old age. She described her mother as proudly announcing her age at birthday dinner celebrations throughout her nineties and delighting in the looks of shock from fellow diners.

"I wanted to give people a way to think about aging that was not negative, a way to think about older women that was not negative," Aptheker explained of her focus on her mother and other aging women in an interview after the talk.

"You could see," she said of her story about her mother, "that death was part of the cycle of life."

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