

# ALUMNAE ASSOCIATION *of* MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

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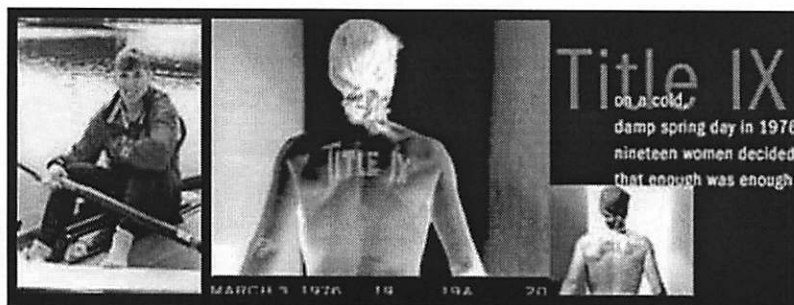
## Rocking the Boat

### How a Women's Crew Team Undressed for Success and Sparked a Revolution for Female Athletes

by *Emily Harrison Weir*

Yale rower Chris Ernst just wanted a hot shower after a cold morning's workout. But back in 1976, the university—like many others—had no athletic facilities for women. So Ernst and her teammates waited on a chilly bus while the men showered and changed clothes. Ice formed on the women's exercise clothes, then melted and met the sweat soaking their clothes from the inside. One day, they decided enough was enough.

Ernst and eighteen teammates silently marched into Yale's athletic office and read a statement to protest the lack of a women's locker-room. In front of a *New York Times* reporter, the crew team stripped to the waist, revealing the words "Title IX" drawn in blue marker on each woman's back and breasts. (Title IX is the landmark 1972 legislation mandating gender equity at institutions receiving federal aid.)



Left: Filmmaker and former Olympic rower Mary Mazzio '83 still works out regularly on the Charles River. Center and right: Olympic rower Chris Ernst's fight for equal rights is chronicled in Mary Mazzio's documentary, *A Hero for Daisy*. Copies of the video are available at [www.aherofordaisy.com](http://www.aherofordaisy.com) or by calling 1-877-98DAISY.

Founded in 1872, the Alumnae Association of Mount Holyoke College is a nonprofit, independent corporation dedicated to supporting the College and its 30,000 alumnae across the world.

The *Times* story prompted an international media furor, and phones started ringing. The women got their showers. "Athletic directors across the country suddenly sat up, because they didn't want to be embarrassed by women stripping in their offices,"

explains Mary Mazzio '83, who directed a documentary film about Ernst. "This sparked nationwide awareness of what fairness and compliance with Title IX meant."

Little did Ernst suspect that the protest she led would help launch a nationwide movement for women's equality in athletics. And not in her wildest dreams did the future Olympic rower envision inspiring—via Mazzio's film—thousands a quarter-century later.

*A Hero for Daisy*, with interviews and archival footage presented at a kinetic MTV-music-video pace, follows the protest and Ernst's quest to become a world-class athlete. The story of this unlikely heroine inspired viewers to think positively about strong women.

A lawyer and former Olympic rower herself, Mazzio started making films to spark social change. "I want to delve into women's issues to encourage people and inspire them to act," she says. A two-minute film on Ernst she made for a class at Boston University whetted Mazzio's appetite for a longer piece on the same subject. "I made the film for my daughter Daisy and other girls, who are in desperate need of strong and accessible role models," Mazzio explains.

Fittingly, Ernst had become Mazzio's role model a decade before the film was made. They met in 1989, while training at the Boston Rowing Center. "I was scared to death of Chris at first," Mazzio remembers. "I was intimidated because my commitment to the sport didn't match hers." But Mazzio asked Ernst to work out with her and later they became housemates. Ernst boosted Mazzio's Olympic aspirations by telling her bluntly to work harder and stop making excuses every time she lost a race. "That profoundly changed my life," Mazzio recalls. "When I stopped going to parties and committed myself to rowing, I went from ranking thirteenth to third in a year." Mazzio, who started rowing at MHC, ultimately earned a place on three U.S. world championship teams and rowed in the 1992 Olympics.

For Ernst, the Yale protest was only one small event in her lifelong quest to defy expectations and overcome obstacles. After college, her heart was set on the Olympics despite being told she was "too short and too funny-looking" to succeed. Ignoring the lack of support and the jeers at her "unladylike" appearance, Ernst pressed on. Long hours on the water and longer ones lifting weights dropped her race times and swelled her biceps to goose-egg size. She could bench-press more than most men and got so strong that the Olympic Committee tested Ernst for gender three times before letting her compete. The final tally validated Ernst's work ethic of "dream a little; sweat a lot": two Olympic teams, ten national teams and a world championship title. Mazzio says

Ernst "forever changed society's expectations of women and how they're 'supposed' to act." Today—still rowing—Ernst makes her living as a plumber, having gone from fighting for showers to fixing them.

*A Hero for Daisy* has played across the U.S. and garnered attention from major media ("Fantastic," wrote *Sports Illustrated*. "A landmark film," proclaimed the *Times*. "Important and powerful," noted ESPN.) It aired on ESPN, Oxygen and other cable networks and is featured at major sports conventions. Mazzio won the 2000 Women's Sports Foundation Journalism Award for her work.

Filmmaking sometimes proved as tough as competition for Mazzio, who says she spent six months convincing Ernst to let her make the film and then dove headfirst into her kid's college fund to shoot it. Corporate sponsors have since appeared, but the documentary was shot on a shoestring in only twelve days.

"The reaction has been much greater and more profound than I ever expected," Mazzio admits. "This film encourages women to use their voices." After seeing *Hero* last year, thirty Connecticut College rowers held a sit-in to demand equal rights from their athletic director. At MHC, the crew team went directly from theatre to gym to do pull-ups. Mazzio says young audiences—boys and girls alike—are generally "totally pumped" by the idea of achieving something others believe is impossible. Going beyond athletic boosterism, *Hero* encourages self-confidence and testing personal limits.

High-school girls have written Mazzio, raving about "the most unbelievable movie I've ever seen." Parents say the film opened dialogue with their teens on issues from eating disorders and body image to expectations of working women and Title IX's consequences. Older women, who were denied Title IX's benefits, have been moved to tears by the "what ifs" *Hero* provoked. Two American University professors created a teaching guide so the film can be used in classrooms. One father wrote that the film helped his nine-year-old daughter "understand the possibilities of strength and empowerment." But perhaps the clearest evidence that *Hero* is changing minds comes from three-year-old Orren Fox, who told Mazzio, "I really like your movie. Women are strong."

*Quarterly associate editor Emily Weir, an in-line skater, was never an Olympic hopeful.*

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