Yale Daily News

“A Hero for Daisy” tells story of coeducation in Yale Athletics

PHOEBE LIU
2:47 AM, SEP 19, 2019

Courtesy of 50 Eggs Film

On March 3, 1976, the 19 members of the Yale women’s crew team marched into

the Yale athletics office and read a statement criticizing the lack of facilities for women's athletics. Led by team captain and two-time Olympian Chris Ernst '76, they then stripped to reveal the words "Title IX," drawn in blue marker on each woman's back and breasts.

The protest proved extremely effective — the following day, a reporter from The New York Times who witnessed the event ran a story that cast an international spotlight on the protest. Less than a month later, the University promised to give the women's crew team locker rooms.

In 1999, former Olympic rower Mary Mazzio created a 40-minute documentary on Ernst and the 1976 protest titled "A Hero for Daisy." Four years ago, the film, which earned widespread critical acclaim over the last 20 years, came full circle — the title refers to Mazzio's daughter, Daisy Mazzio-Manson '20, who enrolled in Yale College in 2016 as a member of the Yale women's crew team.

The film, which was released shortly after Mazzio-Manson's birth, included clips of Mazzio-Manson as a baby. In the documentary, Mazzio depicted Ernst as a hero for her daughter. In an interview with the News, Mazzio called the documentary her "personal anthem" for her daughter.

"I think that growing up in the context of that film meant that my house had a really strong female presence," said Mazzio-Manson. "My mom really emphasized [that] being able to be a strong woman would really make changes in the world, and I felt that I had so many strong women to look up to."

Ginny Gilder '79, a freshman on the team at the time who participated in the protests and is now an Olympic silver medalist in rowing, described Ernst as an "amazing, incredibly tough, take-no-prisoners kind of woman."

Ernst's actions came in the wake of the Title IX legislation enacted just four years earlier in 1972. The law requires that athletics facilities in federal institutions are equally accessible to all sexes.

According to Gilder's description of the daily scene prior to the protests, the men showered in their designated locker room nearby the rowing course after practice. The women, on the other hand, had to wait on the bus for the men's team before driving 12 miles back to campus so they could shower in their dorms. Conversations between the women on the bus inspired Ernst along with teammate Anne Warner '77 to call attention to the inequity between the teams.

"We'd be soaking wet from sweating and the rain and the river's backsplash, and we would wait for 20 or 30 minutes in the bus for the guys," Gilder said.

Mazzio heard the story from Ernst when they were both living and training at the Boston Rowing Center, an Olympic training center at the time.

"She told me this story about how this crazy revolt came to be," said Mazzio. "She said, 'Look, we had no locker rooms and we exhausted diplomatic channels. We were thinking, aren't the girls paying the same tuition as the boys? Why aren't they entitled to [the facilities] they have?'"

Ernst then scheduled an appointment with Yale's athletics administration, and her teammates accompanied her, stripping while she read a statement that began with, "These are the bodies that Yale is exploiting."

In the film, the striking repetition of the phrase emphasizes the power of women who stand with each other, according to Mazzio.

"That demonstration served as a beacon for every athletic director around the country — this is what gender equity is like," Mazzio added. "If Chris's lessons can be picked up and spread, we'll be all the better for it."

Ernst helped a generation of women understand what it means to refuse to conform, Mazzio said.

According to Mazzio-Manson, generations of female athletes have carried on the protest's legacy.

“I think that in the [women’s crew] team today, there’s a history there that no other team really has,” she said.

According to Mazzio-Manson, the crew team’s alumnae still visit often, and the women’s team now has access to a wide array of resources — a situation far removed from the nonexistent locker rooms of the 1970s.

“We have resources equivalent to all the men,” said Mazzio-Manson. “The women’s rowing league is so competitive that I think we even get better racing experience than the men.”

After women’s rowing became part of the NCAA in 1996, three years before the film was released, the number of Division I teams has increased from around 20 to 91, according to William Porter, the women’s crew head coach.

“The resources and opportunity for women quickly outpaced that of men’s rowing,” said Porter.

Despite the increase in resources offered to female athletes, Gilder, as co-owner of the WNBA’s Seattle Storm, believes that “equitable access to sports for women is still a huge issue across the country.”

Both in the film 20 years ago and today, she urged young women and young people to push for change wherever they see inequity.

“How did Yale get to the tipping point where they finally admit women? New ideas start from terrible odds, from people who are unwilling to give up even though it might look ridiculous, and that’s what generates change,” said Gilder. “You build agreement to shift a point of view.”

Porter, who originally helped Mazzio organize a screening for the film in New Haven, said that the documentary “brought to light the challenges that women of the ‘70s and ‘80s faced and it should not be forgotten.”

“It is part of our history,” she added.

Phoebe Liu | phoebe.liu@yale.edu

