

City College professor and new author mostly just wants to keep on teaching

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Alexandra Nickliss is thrilled to have published her first book â?? and even more thrilled to still be teaching U.S. History at City College San Francisco.

That puts her in good company with other older adults who want to keep working, such as U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, 85, television journalist Lesley Stahl, 77, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 86. Nickliss is 75.

Her book, published last May, â??Phoebe Apperson Hearst: A Life of Power and Politics,â?• is the first biography of one of the Gilded Ageâ??s most powerful women and has gotten favorable reviews from ordinary readers to the Wall Street Journal. But her livelihood has been under pressure for a number of years now, as accreditation and financial problems at City College led officials to cut classes and offer instructors retirement incentives.



City College Professor Alexandra Nickliss. Photo by Jan Robbins.

She turned down a â??Golden Handshake;â?• sheâ??s by no means ready to retire. â??I have a passion for teaching. I am young at heart, in good health, and my students help keep me that way. I have great rapport with my students this semester. â??

In fact, her right to continue working past age 40 is guaranteed by the Age Discrimination Act of 1974. Nickliss wants to keep teaching for as long as she can. â??As long as I feel Iâ??m making a contribution and can do the job, Iâ??m going to stick around.â?•

Age hasnâ??t slowed her, but she said she has experienced ageism. She thought the â??distinguished memberâ?• nametag she wore at conferences meant high academic achievement; until others chided her it really meant â??old.â?•

Her teaching philosophy is to make history relevant to today. Her 11th-grade teacher was the first to make history come alive for her, focusing more on stories of people than on names, places and dates. â??Of course, you must know names, places and dates, but I introduce students to the world of ideas, and fit the facts around them. History is a story.â?•

The week Nickliss was interviewed for this article, she lectured on Nixon and Watergate. â??A similar story is being acted out now,â?• she said.

Nickliss was inspired to major in U.S. history by a teacher who took her under her wing at San Jose State. Billie Jean Jensen, she said, â??saw something in me.â?• That was 1968. Both were especially interested in womenâ??s history. Jensen was only the second woman hired in the history department at State. Nickliss was among the first women to enter the Ph.D. program in history at the University of California-Davis. â??It was a very male environment and I felt intimidated,â?• she admitted.

A focus on powerful women

But she turned any hesitations into hard work â?? delving into the history of women who made a difference.

She did her masterâ??s thesis at San Jose State on Anne Martin, one of the leaders of the National Womenâ??s Party, which played a groundbreaking role in securing passage of the 19th amendment, giving women the right to vote.

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She got through her course work at UC-Davis, then while teaching five and sometimes six classes at City College, she pursued her doctoral thesis. Examining the George and Phoebe Apperson Hearst Papers at the Bancroft Library at the University of California-Berkeley, Nickliss decided to focus on the wife of the rancher and gold and silver miner who became one of Californiaâ??s most famous millionaires and newspaper owner.

Phoebe Apperson, who was 19 when she married Hearst, grew into an influential philanthropist, a Progressive Era reformer, suffragist and supporter of causes from education to anthropology. â??She had a dream of going to California and George Hearst, 22 years her senior, made her dream a reality when he married her and took her out of rural Missouri to San Francisco, California,â?• Nickliss said.

Hearstâ??s wife was no handmaiden. She funded a scholarship endowment at UC-Berkeley as well as a competition for a master plan for the campus. â??An international architectural competition brought Hearst and the university a worldwide reputation,â?• said Nickliss. In 1897, she was named the universityâ??s first female regent.

â??She funded, designed and supervised the building of the George Hearst Memorial Mining Building, which is still there, and the Hearst Hall, so women could have a place to organize and be active on campus.â?• The building burned in 1922, but her son Randolph had it resurrected as the Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women in 1927.

Working her way through school

Nickliss would have been a fitting protÃ©gÃ© of Hearst, who wanted to educate and enlighten women. Aside from teaching and writing, seeing family and friends and singing in a choir, she is working on a second book. Itâ??s on the meaning of sexual equality from the American Revolution to 1920 â?? from womenâ??s point of view.

It was 35 years from start to publication of the Phoebe Hearst biography. Nickliss promises it wonâ??t take her that long this time. â??I know the drill.â?• But she acknowledged that â??professors who are working full-time teaching so many classes a semester can take that long to write a dissertation and then turn it into a published book.â?• And she had additional hurdles in writing a â??crossoverâ?• book, which has an academic argument while also appealing to a broader audience. â??Thatâ??s something thatâ??s very challenging to do.â?•

Her aspirations may have been in line with those of Hearst, but Nicklissâ?? path was not similarly paved with gold. After her father died in 2010, she took care of her mother, who came to live with her in San Francisco until she died in 2017. â??Being a teacher, I worked at home a lot. Spending that time with my mom allowed me to get to know her better and give something back to her after all the years she took care of me.â?•

Nickliss worked her way through school, as do many City College students. â??My first job was babysitting at the age of 12 and I worked my way through college and graduate school with retail, secretarial and receptionist jobs,â?• she said.

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â??I tell them I understand their challenges.â?•

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