This presentation was delivered by Emerita Faculty member Bobby Bennett, on behalf of Emerita Professor Eula West, at the annual Florence Hale Stevenson Brunch on February 8, 2015 at the SF State campus. The speech has been edited.

Today is a day of celebration. We celebrate the women who have received the Florence Hale Stephenson Scholarship. And in doing so we celebrate Stephenson and her legacy. And so we celebrate ourselves. In a real sense, we are her legacy. So I would like to talk about her a bit, and about some of the other women whose lives and works have served as exemplars for you and for me and for Eula. These women have been our inspirations, our role models and our mentors. One may have seen your potential and dared you to see it, too. Another may have refused to let you settle for less, when so much more could be achieved. Another, perhaps someone you never knew, may have paved the way for your entry into sport and physical activity.

I invite you to decide for yourself how the women I mention influenced your life, and to think of others as well. It may be in ways that neither you nor she anticipated. And that is also true of how each of us has influenced others. Ultimately, it is about how we live our own lives and how we care for the lives of others – in the general and in the specific. It is about the work we do and the people with and for whom we do it. One day, over a cup of coffee, a colleague said to me that she did not want to be a role model; she just wanted to teach her class. My reply was this: you are a role model. You have no choice. It is only a matter of what role model you choose to be. (As it turns out, she has been a wonderful mentor and role model.)

Yes, you and I have had mentors who were men. But today, in honor of Florence Hale Stephenson, we’ll concentrate on the women in our lives.

I never knew Florence Hale Stephenson. But then, I never knew many of the women who laid the path for Eula and for me and for you, so that we could study sport and physical activity. They were our foremothers, and our inspirations. We may not have been alive when some of them were doing their work. But they carved out places for women and paths we could walk. Places to play, to be, to learn, in a world that really wasn’t crazy about educating women – and most especially not in physical education and sport. They used to make me angry: I thought they constrained us too much in our behaviors and limited our range – even from their graves. Then I realized that without them we would have no range at all. I began to love them when I realized how much they gave of themselves, how much they risked of themselves, to create and protect these spaces for us, and how each succeeding generation expanded their initial visions so that we can now pursue all forms of the study and practice of human movement.

Florence Hale Stephenson was a mentor and an inspiration. She was hired, in 1918, by the San Francisco State Normal School, as department chair for Physical Education.
(By the way, it was the first and only physical education department at that time. There were few if any men on campus in the early days of the Normal School.) Stephenson had not a degree to her name though she eventually achieved both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. In addition to her administrative duties, she taught classes and coached team games. Sound familiar? I would guess that her extra duties did not carry extra salary! She began the Women’s Athletic Association, with women participating in basketball, tennis, golf, ice-skating and speedball. Soon, the WAA joined the Athletic Conference of American College Women. Stephenson was still chair when the College moved to the current campus, where, with new gymnasium and field spaces, she could further develop opportunities for women. Florence Hale Stephenson was a visionary. She built and mentored a faculty who were daring and who were visionaries in their own rights and times. Soon after she retired, Ann Paterson became chair. More on Ann in a moment.

I want to move to more contemporary women at SFSU. Though I’m focusing on the women I knew, there were others who were important to you. I’d like you to think about how all of these women mentored you, inspired you, and continue to operate in the background of your life. I hope you will notice the interconnections among them, and how their influences flow out to other women and through time.

I came to San Francisco State in 1972, having been hired when Blanche Drury retired. I would never say I “replaced” Blanche Drury. That would have been impossible. Blanche was known as a tough teacher. The word was that, if you dropped your pencil while she was lecturing in Kinesiology, you’d fail the class. But Blanche was also one of the most caring and supportive of teachers. I know she dragged some of you through her classes – because you have told me so. Blanche was also the woman who would beg her colleagues to give a student a second chance. She was a Renaissance woman of sorts. Her background was in Physical Therapy. She started the Pre-PT program because she saw a need for it among students. With Andrea Schmid, she was instrumental in developing gymnastics across the state and country. She was Andrea’s mentor during Andrea’s early days in the US. Ask Andrea what that meant to her. And Blanche was my mentor, coming to the campus to help me get started, even after she had retired. Blanche Drury was important in my life, and an inspiration to me (to say nothing of the fact that she let me use her lesson plans while I was developing my own). And Andrea was my mentor. And Eula was Andrea’s mentor.

Now back to Ann Paterson. Most of you knew her, I think. Ann was the Queen of the Campus at San Francisco State, as well as Chair of Women’s Physical Education. Ann came to San Francisco State from the Ohio State University. She led her department with both vision and a strong sense of reality. She carved out and protected spaces for sport, eastern movement forms, and dance. Ann was very influential in expanding the dance program, so that it represented diverse cultural and ethnic forms. And she hired a faculty who also represented diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. She was instrumental in the settlement of the SFSU strikes in 1968, (though she and I would have been on opposite sides of the picket lines). She knew everyone on campus. Because she was a true citizen of the university, she could accomplish things for women’s physical education that might have been impossible had she never left her
office in the gym. This she taught me and this she taught Eula. It was a very important lesson.

Ann was mentored by Gladys Palmer, who, in 1929, went to the Ohio State University as an assistant professor. As a member of the National Committee on Women’s Athletics, Ms. Palmer wrote an early book on baseball for women. She thought that the women’s game needed “rules to fit the peculiar needs and abilities of girls and women.” But consider: the very notion of baseball for women was transgressive! Palmer was involved in creating intercollegiate competition for college women when relatively little was available, including, in 1941, the first women’s intercollegiate golf championship. To this day, the Women’s Golf Coaches Association gives an award in her name: The Gladys Palmer Meritorious Service Award.

Gladys Palmer mentored Ann Paterson. In turn, Ann Paterson mentored and inspired many other women, some by kicking them out of the nest! Young women came to San Francisco State to study for their master’s degrees and to teach part time while doing so. Ann would not let them stay. She sent them on their ways to get their doctorates. And many did. And then they fanned out across California and across the country to create their own waves of inspiration.

Eula West first met Ann at the Ohio State University. Ann was a senior faculty member. And Eula was a very young teacher. Here is how Eula got to Ohio State: having finished her master’s degree at NYU, 23 year old Eula was visiting her UK department chair, Dr. Martha Carr. Dr. Carr asked Eula what she was going to do now. Eula replied that she thought she’d find a job teaching high school physical education in Kentucky. Dr. Carr said, “just you wait a second. There is a job open at the Ohio State University for a young woman like you.” At that point, she picked up the phone and called her colleague, Margaret Mordy, the new women’s chair at Ohio State. She said, “Margaret, is your sports position still open? I know you are looking for someone who can teach several different sports, run the WRA, and who will work well with all the other faculty without taking sides in department politics.” So, in those mean days before fair hiring practices, Eula West went off to the Ohio State University. And there she met Ann Paterson. Ann and Gladys Palmer took Eula to dinner, to get to know her. Ann included Eula in all her social events. I asked Eula why Ann originally took an interest in her. Eula said, “I didn’t take sides, I worked hard, and I knew how to dress.”

When Ann became chair at San Francisco State, she was looking for a young faculty member with a doctorate who could teach sports, measurement, other classes as assigned, run the WRA, not take sides in department politics – and who knew how to dress. Who do you think she called????

So, here we are with Eula West. Who were her other mentors, role models and inspirations? Who did she mentor and inspire? There was Jo Pack, her first high school physical education teacher. When Eula ran into Jo Pack, in their home town, and when Jo remembered her as “that good little basketball player,” Eula immediately became thirteen years old again! There is Martha Carr, chair at UK, who took an interest in Eula because she was a good student and a good athlete, and was a student leader in the WRA. Pat Shely, her first fencing coach, who taught Eula it was okay to step into the
unfamiliar and to excel at it. And Evelyn Amerol, with whom Eula taught at Horace Mann here in San Francisco, and who taught her about consistency and loving your students, and being both firm with them and always present for them. There was Nonzizi Cayou, who mentored Eula and was mentored by her. And there is a line from Nancy McDermid, the first female Dean of a College at SFSU, to Eula, and from Eula back to Nancy. And from both of them to me. (Eula tells me that I have been her mentor. She has certainly been mine.) There are students without number who have been mentored by Eula, and many, many faculty. Eula was Andrea’s first office mate, when Andrea – who could barely speak English – was assigned to sponsor the WRA. Nonzizi Cayou, who mentored Eula and was mentored by her. And there is a line from Nancy McDermid, the first female Dean of a College at SFSU, to Eula, and from Eula back to Nancy. And from both of them to me. (Eula tells me that I have been her mentor. She has certainly been mine.) There are students without number who have been mentored by Eula, and many, many faculty. Eula was Andrea’s first office mate, when Andrea – who could barely speak English – was assigned to sponsor the WRA. There is Diane Kalliam, Coni Staff, Gooch Foster. There is Frieda Lee. (How did Frieda get her job at San Francisco State? Eula looked around the department, saw many, many Asian students and no Asian faculty. So she called Robbie Park at Cal. “Robbie, I’m trying to diversify this department. I need to hire a young woman faculty member who can teach many sports, will not take sides in altercations between older faculty members, is a hard worker, knows how to dress – and is Asian!” And so Frieda came to San Francisco State, to be a mentor and role model for the many young Asian women in the department, and for every woman and man with whom she has worked ever since – including me.

By the way, Robbie Park’s influence certainly extends to San Francisco State: She was influential in the lives of Frieda Lee, to Maryalice Kern, Susan Zieff, and Claudia Guedes.

I want to take a moment to mention some of the women who were inspirations to me, who helped me plot my life: Laura Huelster and the women she guided and who were my professors at the University of Illinois; my dear friend Ann Jewett, who taught me what it means to be a professional and to work for social change from within our organizations, rather than taking pot shots from the edge; Frances Hellebrandt and Ruth Glassow, whose work in movement sciences showed me what was possible; a woman named Kay who taught me how to ride horses, lead others, and do the clean-up; Margaret H’Doubler and Eleanor Metheny, who were humanists and who expanded my thinking about the breadth of forms of human movement and about how movement is a way of knowing one’s self. My patient and forbearing colleagues in our department: Joan Johnson who said “you should do it now, kid” – when doing it now could be risky. Many, many students who taught me lessons every day. Nancy McDermid, Sally Gearhart, Jane Gurko, and my other sisters in Women Studies. And finally, and most important of all, Eula West.

You really never know what meaning you might have in another’s life. It is a daunting thought. Frightening. You and I remember times when we did not do this business of living very well. But I know that you have a long legacy and a long heritage. I saw a quote once that said “sometimes the women of my family come to me in my dreams.” We are each other’s professional family.

If any of the women in this room have inspired you, have been your role models or mentors, have given you support when you most needed it, have fought battles with and for you, -- older or younger, or contemporaneous with you – I hope you will take a moment to thank them before you leave today. And take a moment to thank the women
who have left their marks on our worlds, who are gone from us, and whom we remember with love for their works, for how they lived, and for what they contributed to our lives.