

Wired and inspired: Dr. Joan Korenman in her soon-to-be-finished offices at UMBC.



DAVID COLWELL

Web master

UMBC's Joan Korenman is making sure the IT revolution doesn't leave women behind. By Elizabeth A. Evitts

When you think of the prominent pioneers of Information Technology, names of men like Bill Gates, Steve Case, and Steve Jobs pop to mind. But ask women around the globe that question, and chances are that they'll give you a different answer: Joan Korenman.

Ask Dianne Lynch, author of the "Wired Women" column for ABC-NEWS.com. Her work puts her in touch with the heaviest hitters in the IT community. She believes Korenman, a tenured professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, is one of the most influential women on the web today. "When I first started to write my column years ago, I set out to establish some networks," Lynch says. "One name came up repeatedly in my research. People said, 'Have you seen Joan Korenman's work? Have you been to Maryland?'"

UMBC's Catonsville campus is the home to Korenman's brainchild: the Center for Women and Information Technology. Korenman conceived the Center five years ago when she saw a disturbing trend in the tech industry. "A few years ago, when you typed the word 'women' into the three largest search engines, eight of the top ten most relevant hits were porno sites," Korenman says.

The other two hits were usually for inane web pages like *Women.com*, where the "technology" section presented snapshots of men and asked female viewers to rate the hottest male computer geek. For Korenman, it was all bad news.

"It was clear to me that IT was going to be tremendously important to all of us, but that women were very underrepresented as developers of technology," Korenman says. "It's one thing to use a search engine or to use e-mail—those

are all terrific—but they don't involve the same degree of influence or power that creating the search engine or administering the network does. Too few women are in a position to influence the directions that IT takes."

She worried that a glass ceiling was being built within the Internet, and saw only one remedy: education. After all, it had worked before. Says Korenman: "There was a time when women were not encouraged to study law or medicine. Cultural expectations shift."

KORENMAN UNDERSTANDS CULTURAL shifts well. She first came to UMBC in 1969 from Harvard, the ink not yet dry on her doctoral thesis in American literature.

It was an exciting time to be a young professor. War and social upheaval were reshaping the academic canon, and Korenman was at the forefront of a nascent idea: Women's Studies. She began teaching literature written by women whom she had never encountered in her own coursework. In 1982, Korenman was named director of the school's newly created Women's Studies department.

She soon cultivated a broad network of scholarly connections. In 1990, one of those connections inadvertently changed her life. Korenman frequently traded letters with a professor in Minnesota, and that colleague suggested they use a new innovation called e-mail. Korenman logged on for the first time, and her world changed. "It's hard for me to recreate that feeling now," she says. "I found it more compelling than almost anything else I had done since I was a kid."

Korenman felt liberated. She would log on at 2 a.m. with a question about technology, and someone across the globe would answer. She realized the awesome potential this could have on academic studies. After teaching a full load of classes, Korenman would work late into the evening, teaching herself the basics of web design. She developed the WMST-L listserv, an international e-mail forum for discussion of women's issues. Her list grew to over 4,000

subscribers in 47 countries: Today, it is perhaps the largest women-related academic e-mail forum in the world.

The information shared online over the subsequent years championed women's issues in the most remote areas, and has served in critical court cases worldwide. In 1995, she flew to Beijing for the United Nations Conference on Women to discuss her work.

By 1997, Korenman decided to publish what she'd found. That book, *Internet Resources on Women*, became a guidebook for the field.

In her research, the professor was astonished at how information technology was changing the way the world operated. She was equally astonished at the gender gap that had developed in computer sciences. Women in general were not only using IT less than their male counterparts, they were all but absent from its development. Males reigned supreme in the top spots at technology companies. Korenman was determined to find out why.

Around the same time that Korenman was researching her book, Dr. Mary Pipher was publishing *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Pipher, a psychologist with 20 plus years treating girls, explored why young women suffered academic and personal fallout at the onset of puberty. "I was struck by what a girl-poisoning culture it was," Dr. Pipher wrote in 1995. "America today limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized."

Korenman was seeing this "Ophelia complex" in the IT community. Girls were dropping out of computer classes at a staggering rate. She refers to it as a leaky pipeline. "You see a lot of girls in elementary school excited about computers and then they get to middle school and they're very wary of anything that calls into question their budding femininity," Korenman says.

The leak continues into higher education. Social scientist Jane Margolis and computer scientist and educator Allan Fisher interviewed over 100 computer science students at Carnegie Mellon University to understand why women made up a mere 20 percent of computer professionals. In their book *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing*, the authors note that, despite well-intentioned parents, boys were often encouraged to explore computers at an early age, while girls were not.

Korenman knew she needed to mend this leaky pipeline. Otherwise, she feared women could become the "new illiterates" of a tech-driven society. She launched a Women's Studies website that culled legitimate resources from the chaff, and represented the diverse voices of women more accurately. To give a physical presence to her online revolution, in 1998 Korenman stepped down from Women's Studies, brought the lessons learned from its website, and started the Center for Women and Information Technology (CWIT).

While most in the industry nursed a hangover from the crash of the '90s tech party, Korenman soberly and steadily worked to bring valuable content and clarity

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to the often chaotic online community. "There are so many people who are stars, who are flashy," ABCNEWS.com's Lynch says. "And there are those people who carry the load and just keep at it."

Korenman is one of those persistent people. In 2001, the nonprofit group San Francisco Women of the Web recognized Korenman's achievements by naming her one of their Top 25 Women of the Year. Getting recognition from the Silicon Valley-area's cognoscenti further boosted Korenman's stature.

It's even more impressive considering that the CWIT operates with a full-time staff of just three people (including Korenman), and an active board of 20 to 25 professionals. In addition to the website, the Center provides scholarships, mentoring, workforce development, and a speaker's series.

Michelle Benvenga, vice president of T. Rowe Price Investment Technologies, Inc, has served on the CWIT board since the Center's inception. She mentors women and helps prepare them for the

transition into the IT workforce. "Life is a continuum," Benvenga says. "We reach out to middle school, high school, and college students, and provide continued mentoring for adults. There are so few women in technology at all levels, that they don't realize that the experiences that they are having are similar."

Benvenga fits regular communication with her mentees into a very busy work schedule. "We e-mail daily and meet every other week," Benvenga says. "I'm so surprised about some of the situations that they encounter. It's similar to what I encountered 20 years ago."

Soon CWIT will have an official home, a high-tech office space in the university's new technology building. Moving to the new site represents a major step in the growth of CWIT. Korenman and her crew will more easily work side by side with other computer and IT departments on the campus. And they will be busy implementing a long list of new programs fueled by a successful year of active fundraising (the Center recently received \$118,000 from the National Science Foundation to create a four-minute, high-quality, MTV-style music video on the theme of women and technology).

For now, Korenman's cramped office is the unlikely home to what Lynch dubbed "the best resource on women and technology on the web."

Her desk exists somewhere below an impressive heap of documents. A nearby bookshelf sags under the weight of journals, anthologies, and course catalogues. The walls behind her are papered with 30 years worth of posters, pictures, and cartoons—the physical evidence of a rich personal and professional life here at UMBC. There is the fading photo of her climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania; another is of her and her husband, Victor, near the pyramids of Egypt. One might overlook the computer hiding in the corner, except that it beeps plaintively every few seconds. "It tells me when I receive a new e-mail," Korenman explains.

Korenman receives e-mails (too many to quantify, she says) from people around the world asking questions and reaching out for information. The beeps keep sounding as Korenman talks—the electronic queries of women and men from all over the world, looking for Korenman's assistance in navigating a brave new world. ■