Law professor Ann Scales delighted in upending the status quo, with gusto and an expansive sense of humor.

She earned a national reputation as a feminist scholar during a career that zigzagged from defending Ford in lawsuits over exploding Pintos just after law school to handling actor divorces at an all-women Beverly Hills firm in order to pay for race and sex discrimination cases. She kept on litigating trailblazing cases during an 18-year career at the University of New Mexico School of Law and eight years at the University of Denver College of Law, joking during a 2010 interview that she hadn’t had a paying client since 1980, when she began teaching.

Scales, 60, survived breast cancer in 2007 to die of complications from brain trauma sustained in a fall at her house earlier this month. She died Sunday morning at a hospice center in Denver over a week after life supports were removed.

Scales had an impact on students and colleagues in Denver, 100 of whom showed up for a vigil after learning of the injuries from which there was no hope of recovery.

In New Mexico, former student, friend and Court of Appeals Judge Linda Vanzi said Scales had a way of connecting with anyone whose path she crossed and making them feel instantly at ease.

A memorial service will be held at the law school once the semester begins, when chiles are roasting — a time Scales particularly loved. She owned a home here, had planned to come to New Mexico for her sabbatical and stay until December.

“Her brilliance was in teaching,” said Vanzi, who took a class in feminist jurisprudence from Scales. “She made you think creatively and outside the box. She made you think about how to change the rules and not just to follow them. She was about where can we change the law to make things better, not to just accept things.”

Edna Sprague-Harris, an assistant district attorney who prosecutes domestic violence felonies, credits a cross-listed undergraduate class with Scales as leading her to the law.

“She made me think anything was possible,” she said. “I was coming off a horrid marriage. … But rather than just heightening bitterness or anger, she focused my sense of justice (and) honed my dedication to women on a political/legal level.”

Another longtime friend said Scales was “one of my favorite people ever. It’s so hard to accept the idea of a world without her brilliant and hilarious presence,” said Michele Guttmann in an email.
UNM law professor Fred Hart said he got to know Scales over the years she officed next to him, 1980 to 1998.

“She was very smart, had a great sense of humor and enjoyed other people’s jokes as well as her own,” Hart said. “She always had a wonderful relationship with the students. She cared about them and wanted them to learn.”

Scales grew up in Oklahoma, where she rodeo’d, and in North Carolina. In both places, her father was a college president. She earned an undergraduate degree from Wellesley College and a juris doctor from Harvard Law School, where she founded the Harvard Women’s Law Journal.

While at UNM, she argued the case in which the New Mexico Supreme Court became the first high court in the nation to hold that abortion funding is required by women’s interest in equality.

Scales said in an interview at Wake Forest of the 1992 case New Mexico case, “It was the first time you see a court unanimously saying that reproduction has historically been used as a sword against women,” and noting that the legal reasoning has since been taken up by many other states.

Scales was a prolific writer, publishing numerous law review articles and the 2006 book “Legal Feminism: Activism, Lawyering and Legal Theory,” described as “a dejargonized, lively account of how feminist jurisprudence can solve traditional legal conflicts.”

Alfred Brophy, in a post on the blog Faculty Lounge, wrote, “Ann told me that she wrote it so that federal judges could understand feminist legal thought and why it matters. In that she succeeded magnificently, as with everything she did.”

Scales, who taught torts at UNM, turned her breast cancer experience into musings about causation, economic vulnerability and the impact of the disease on particular populations.

“The work that she did has been really important just in terms of law,” Vanzi said. “She was always funny. Nobody ever scared her. Ann always welcomed different points of view.”

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