

NEW YORK

The camera men were aiming their equipment at me, ready along with the reporters holding their pads and pens. I blinked, unused to such attention, but this was New York, and that must be how they greeted new college presidents.

It wasn't, of course, the usual university announcement in 1985. The City University of New York had snared what I categorize as a dancing bear, an oddity, performing unusual maneuvers for one of its species.

First of all, I was a woman, who was going to become president of a four-year CUNY college and one of the most prestigious at that. There was one woman president at Hunter College, known then as the women's college, and another at a community college. But this was different.

Not only was I a woman, I was not a New Yorker. I had come from the boonies, the University of Maryland in—where was that? And oddest of all, I had a cornball southern accent, not an elegant, Southern-aristocratic one, but one right out of East Texas. Texas, for heavens' sake! I wouldn't last long, but they would feast on me now.

And then they found out somehow (probably from the CUNY PR guys) that I was also Jewish, Orthodox by Texas standards though not by those of Brooklyn. But Jewish was enough. Shirley Strum Kenny, a Texas Jew. A contradiction in terms—whoever heard of a Texas Jew?

I answered their questions as best I could, smiled my Texas smile, and probably tried to curb my Texas accent (although three decades later, I have still not been able to manage that). I

can only imagine that Chancellor Joe Murphy, whose mother was Jewish, enjoyed every minute; after all, we were two Jews named Murphy and Kenny.

They weren't particularly interested in the fact that I was a mother or for that matter a wife, and my eighteenth-century literary research certainly would have bored them had they asked about it. They were interested in their dancing bear. And so I obediently performed.

The headlines the next day would never be tolerated now: "Fem Prexy. . ." or, better yet, "Texas Jew. . ." appointed as President of Queens College. I was in every paper, including the gossip columns. They had their story. Joe Murphy had his outrageous appointment. And I had a new job that I'd better learn fast—no one wants a dancing bear to head an educational institution.