Linda West Little is no stranger to barricades – or scrambling over them. The first woman to receive a doctorate (in 1968) from the Gillings School’s Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering (ESE), she became the department’s first woman faculty member in 1970.

In the decade following, she conducted industrial waste research at UNC-Chapel Hill and the Research Triangle Institute and served as administrative judge with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s Atomic Safety and Licensing Board. Little was one of three judges who conducted hearings on the restart of Three Mile Island Unit 1 after the catastrophic accident at Unit II in 1979.

In 1983, she was named executive director of the N.C. Governor’s Waste Management Board, established to develop facilities for handling low-level radioactive and other hazardous wastes produced by industry, medicine, utilities and other sources. In 1990, she acquired additional responsibilities as the first director of the N.C. Office of Environmental Education.

While she taught at UNC’s public health school, Little advocated for her students to attend conferences, present papers and conduct field research.

“A student needs to be introduced to the real world, not just be confined to classrooms and laboratories,” she says. “Complex environmental problems may have simple answers – but they’re usually simple wrong answers. When students meet environmental professionals at conferences and in field settings, not only can they network about career opportunities, but they can test their own ideas against other scientists’, thereby improving the quality of their thought and their research.”

Finding the money to defray student expenses for travel was difficult, though. “Research grants and contracts provided little or no support,” she says, “and I suspect the situation is even worse now.”

That lack of funding inspired the establishment of The Linda West Little Research Endowment in Waste Management.

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Income paid from the fund will be used to support ESE graduate students learning about scientific waste management, particularly for student travel or field research support.

At the start of her career, Little was especially inspired by the teaching and research of ESE faculty member Dr. James C. Lamb III and by encouragement from Lamb and Dr. Charles Weiss. “Without their support, I wouldn’t have been admitted to the program, nor would I have had the success I’ve had,” she says.

Now other ESE students may pay similar tribute to Little, for her interest in their success.

—Linda Kastleman