

Betsy Wackernagel Bach, 2009 President,
National Communication Association

Betsy Wackernagel Bach

I never thought that my first full-time job as a cop would serve me so well in my role as an NCA officer. I faced several challenges during my tenure with NCA and relied on the skills that I developed mediating domestic disputes on more than one occasion.

I did not plan to be a cop; I also never planned on being NCA president. I was raised in a blue collar family in Bergen County, New Jersey, the only child of a librarian from Great Falls, Montana, and a television technician from Toledo, Ohio. Although my mother had a Master's degree in Library Science, my father had only a high school degree, as he joined the Navy to serve as a radio officer in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters during WWII. They hoped that I would "try" to attend college, but it was not expected. After I was born, my mother worked as a stay-at-home mom, so did not use her advanced degree. I often wonder if she expected that my degree would not be put to use if I went to college.

That said, my parents encouraged me to do well. I had many opportunities as a child to participate in the arts, which I did mainly as a Girl Scout. Our troop had two active young women as our leaders, and they often took out troop of 12 girls on trips to New York City to go to museums, the theater, and the ballet. I remained a Girl Scout until I graduated from high school so that I could continue to attend these events, and was exposed to many wonderful artistic endeavors.

I was a gregarious kid. I always had a host of friends, and talked incessantly as a child. Much to my mother's chagrin (her English was much more refined), in addition to speaking a lot, I spoke with a very strong New Jersey accent. Family lore has it that a

newly-minted speech therapist from Iowa came to our second grade class to test children for possible speech therapy, and I was flagged for this service because the therapist decided that I had a speech impediment. My mother (and others) informed her that my rapid speech and pronunciation was nothing other than Northern Jersey patois. My social nature did not go unrecognized by my elementary school teachers. I remember receiving seven marks of “unsatisfactory” for deportment in the fourth grade, because of my incessant talking during class. My sixth grade teacher wrote this to me in my second quarter report: “A mouth in motion results in the downward grades shown. Talk less and work more.” I was not terribly fond of my sixth grade teacher as a result. I did heed his advice, however, and by high school I was a bit more serious about my studies. I still liked to socialize, however, and earned the nickname “Bubbles” from my 11th grade history teacher.

I developed a knack for language in middle and high schools, and took full advantage of my high school’s language program. I studied both German and Spanish (perhaps so I could talk even more in class) and, with my parents’ encouragement, participated in a summer study abroad program for high school juniors in Coatzacoalcos, Mexico, where I lived in a family with six children. Both my Spanish, tolerance for living with many others, and my desire to attend college to major in Spanish improved during my stay. I was awarded my high school’s language award on graduation day, much to my delight and surprise.

I was exposed to radio communication at an early age as both my father’s vocation and avocation included broadcast media. I have fond memories of sitting at his “ham” radio set with him when I was a child, listening to him talk with other amateur

radio operators all over the world. He had a huge map of the world next to his set, pushpins noting every place where he had made a contact. My interest in language most likely emanated from listening to and watching him talk with people scattered across the globe. His vocation was even more exciting. He began work as a camera operator for NBC-TV in New York City in 1950, when TV was in its infancy. He had many fascinating stories to tell about meeting and working with TV celebrities such as Ernie Kovacs, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley and Johnny Carson. Occasionally I would accompany him to work, and he would take me to the sets where he worked. I vividly remember one trip where he took me to the set of the Tonight Show and I had the opportunity to sit in Johnny Carson's chair. He also was one of the camera operators at Tiny Tim's wedding on Carson and came home with potted tulips that we later planted in our front yard. I still have several cardboard Jeopardy answer cards that he brought home when they broke down the set after televising a show.

I initially applied to one college, Muhlenberg, as it was the "family" school. My father's grandfather taught languages there and served as interim president for a year. Their language program had a good reputation, and it appeared to be an excellent fit. I remember going to Pennsylvania for an admissions interview and looking at a photo of my great-grandfather on the "Wall of Presidents." I also vividly remember my interviewer—I squirmed in the leather seat across from him as he drilled me about my low SAT scores. He was very impressed with my family pedigree; he was much less impressed with me. Even though I graduated in the top 25 of a class of 435 students, I was denied admission. My plans for college appeared dim at best.

Shortly after my rejection from Muhlenberg, I was standing in my high school guidance office to meet with my counselor to tell her the bad news. The line to see her was long. I waited in the office, just biding my time, when a man approached me. He introduced himself as Bill Vandenberg and asked, "How would you like to hear a presentation about Hope College?" I took the bait, and he sat and talked with me one-to-one about this school with a weird name on a lake in Western Michigan. They had a Spanish major, and I was hooked. I applied and was accepted a month later. I credit Bill Vandenberg for helping me make one of the most important decisions of my career, as I enrolled at Hope in the fall of 1970.

I lived my college life to the fullest and credit much of my growth as a leader and scholar to my professors at Hope College. They taught me how to think critically, reason, and most of all, write well. My undergraduate education was unparalleled. During the end of my sophomore year at Hope I took an Introduction to Human Communication class to fulfill general education credit. I enrolled in the course because the title intrigued me. It was taught by a newly-hired professor named Joe MacDoniels and offered in a newly formed department, Communication. I was obsessed, and was among the first group of Communication Majors to graduate from Hope. Our courses ran the gamut from interpersonal to organizational; to drama, oral interpretation, broadcast, and voice and diction. While Hope had a superb forensics and debate team, I did not participate. I graduated with a B.A. in Communication.

Although I was outgoing, I was unsure of my leadership abilities, and during meetings I remember being quiet and soft-spoken, as I was afraid to publically commit to decisions. That changed at Hope, where I learned that I could be a leader. I got my first

taste of leadership as captain of my pledge class and later parlayed that role into serving as the dreaded pledge master and later as sorority president. What I learned was that my peers found me at once reliable and credible and trusted me to represent their interests. I loved having their support.

The first application of my B.A. in Communication came six months after I graduated. Having completed a job as an on-the-road admissions counselor for Hope, I was at loose ends. For some reason that is still not clear to me today, I decided to walk down to the Holland, MI police station to inquire if they were hiring people to “talk on the radio,” figuring that my one course in broadcasting, coupled with my observations of my father “hamming” qualified me for the job. I was hired as a civilian dispatcher, and loved every minute of it. I was working in a communications job!

I was approached not long after and asked to apply for a job as a police officer. The department had received a grant to expand their Community Relations Division and needed someone to work in that unit. The job was a tough one—to provide programs on a number of topics ranging from drug use and abuse to eighth graders to handling and managing domestic disputes in progress. I was hired because of my degree in communication and sent to police academy to learn how to handle myself on the street. I spent days in the schools and nights with a partner responding to calls ranging from partner abuse to all forms of assault, and was proud to be the second female officer hired by the department. There were times when I mused that controlling a domestic dispute was much easier than facing a class of eighth graders who took great pleasure in “oinking” at an officer in dress blues. Luckily I only saw the receiving end of a shotgun once, but it was a constant reminder of the dangers involved with the job. I became a very skilled

mediator, as our goal was to keep squabbling partners out of jail, and developed the skin of an armadillo. I found that having a very thick skin was a way to successfully manage a dispute—if I could get people to yell at me, rather than each other, the dispute was easier to manage. I also developed a good sense of humor, as making people laugh was a wonderful way to disarm them (both verbally and physically). I worked as an officer for three years.

I met my husband of 31 years while I was a cop. My job as a domestic dispute officer involved turning cases over to Seminary students for follow-up counseling. My husband was one of the seminary students enrolled in our case management group. We cut quite a swath walking in downtown Holland, Michigan as “Officer Betsy and Pastor Paul.” People didn’t know what to make of a uniformed female police officer and a man in a clerical collar. We married, and decided to pursue graduate work at the University of Montana. I hoped to learn more about conflict resolution and he about clinical psychology, so after sending applications to many different schools and much debate over the best fit for our collective careers, we moved to Missoula.

I enrolled in the Department of Interpersonal Communication at Montana to work with Bill Wilmot and learn more about conflict. Bill took me under his wing and became my mentor, and I attribute much of who I am today to his teaching and sage advice. He taught me to not take myself so seriously and to trust my intellectual instincts. Like many graduate students, I was unsure of my intellectual abilities, and Bill cheered me on throughout my M.A. studies. I modeled my teaching style after his. Both Bill and Michael Hecht, also a UM faculty member at the time, encouraged me to pursue a Ph.D.

I was scared, but decided to go for it with their support. I will always be indebted to them!

I was most fortunate to land at the University of Washington (again after many applications and search to find the best fit for a dual career couple) to pursue my Ph.D. studies. I was most fortunate to study with a superb group of faculty and work with an excellent Ph.D. cohort, while my spouse completed his internship at UW Medical Center. Tom Scheidel created a department where collegiality was strongly encouraged, and graduate students flourished learning in a supportive environment. I became enamored with organizational communication after taking a course from Teri Albrecht, and worked closely with her until the completion of my Ph.D. Following her advice, I investigated the impact of multiplex communication networks on innovation adoption, and studied the work, social, and innovation networks of a group of physicians and how these links impacted their ability to adopt a new clinic procedure. While at Washington I also studied instructional communication and learned a great deal from both Ann Staton and Jody Nyquist. my knowledge of classroom communication and teaching skills were well-honed when I left, thanks to their guidance. I also owe a strong debt of gratitude to Gerry Philipsen for introducing me to the ethnographic method.

I was even more fortunate to return to the University of Montana for my first job. My husband had received a full time job offer in Missoula, so upon completion of his internship, he moved to Missoula. I spent my second year at Washington living on my own and the third year “commuting” from Missoula to Seattle monthly. I became very familiar with I-90 and the 482 mile drive between the two cities. On a good day I could

leave Missoula at 6:00 a.m. and arrive in Seattle for a late lunch, along with an hour time change.

My job prospects in Missoula looked very dim, but because I was writing my dissertation, I decided to move there. Much to my delight, a tenure track position became available. Although I had not yet finished, I applied for the position, was hired, and began teaching in the fall of 1984, ABD. That was the hardest year of my life. As a new faculty member on the quarter system I had four new preps during my first year. That, coupled with finishing my dissertation, made life very stressful. Given my experience I would never advise anyone to begin a university teaching job without finishing the dissertation first!

I settled in at Montana and found myself in a department with stellar colleagues, bright graduate students, and for the most part, motivated undergrads. I found my niche in teaching and loved it! Even today, I am indebted to my colleagues for allowing me to double up my teaching so that I could take spring quarter off after my son was born in 1987. They were very flexible and accommodating of my schedule, which wasn't often the case for pre-tenure female professors of childbearing age in the late 1980's. When I returned from my quarter (and subsequent summer) "off," I re-dedicated myself to teaching and research. Much to my delight I was awarded the University's Distinguished Teaching Award for my efforts in the classroom, and consider this to be one of my proudest accomplishments.

My first foray into disciplinary service was in 1991. I found that I had a passion for organizing and leadership, and while representing my department at the WSCA Legislative assembly, was elected as a Delegate-at-Large to the WSCA Executive

Council. I served on the Council for eight straight years upon my election, making my way up to Second Vice President, President, and Immediate Past President. I served with many wonderful people who were also passionate about both the discipline and WSCA. I planned the 1996 convention, "Making a Difference," in Pasadena, and served as President in 1997, at the Monterey Bay convention. I completed my service for WSCA in 1998. My fondest memory of WSCA was having hotel security break up my President's party. They received complaints from other hotel guests about the raucous laughter coming from my room. Several of my colleagues (Dawn Braithwaite, Ann Darling, Jan Hoffmann, Tom Scheidel and Bill Wilmot), had "crashed" my party dressed as the Village People, and dancing to their theme song "YMCA." (n.b., for those of you who are not WSCA attendees, each year at the Sock Hop we dance to *YMCA*, while screaming and spelling out "WSCA.") People attending the party howled with laughter when they entered the room and the entire party erupted into the dance.

In 1999, I applied for, and was appointed as Assistant Provost for Retention and Enrollment Management at Montana. It was a challenging position, and I loved it. Not only was I in charge of coordinating with the Office of Student Services to increase student retention, I oversaw the campus curriculum and shepherded curriculum changes and proposals as they went to the Board of Regents, was in charge of campus assessment, facilitated the Student Complaint Committee, and wrote the proposal for, founded, and directed our Center for Teaching Excellence. I learned the value of multi-tasking and it served me well. I served in this role for five years and then was asked to become Interim Dean of the Davidson Honors College, a job I held from 2004-2006.

My two years in the Honors College were pure joy. I worked with the brightest students on campus. It was the best of both worlds—like working in a small, private, liberal arts college environment with the curriculum afforded a large state university. I cut my fundraising teeth during this time, and learned the value of cultivating lasting donor relationships and friendships. I increased donations over 300% in my two years there, and more than doubled the number of full-ride scholarships offered. I still keep in touch with many donors ten years later.

In 2002, I turned again to association service, as I believed that my organizational skills could be of use at the national level. I applied to serve as Director of the Educational Policies Board, and was appointed to this three-year post in 2002, thanks to support from Isa Engleberg and Judy Pearson. This position is a commitment, as it not only involves oversight for five committee members charged with developing educational activities for the association, at the time it also meant traveling to DC on a quarterly basis to attend Executive Committee (EC) meetings. However, these meetings became much less tedious as Dawn Braithwaite joined the EC the year after as Director of the Research Board. While Dawn and I had been friends prior to our work on the EC, our travel together deepened our friendship. We frequently collaborated on projects, and often had “board wars,” to develop a fun and healthy competition between our two groups. We began regular visits to funding agencies each time we traveled to DC, and, with Associate Director Sherry Morreale, extended our working relationships with several divisions of the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, the Consortium of Social Science Associations, the National Education Association, the Council of Graduate Studies, and the American Association for Higher Education, and the American

Association of Colleges and Universities (among others). We were very successful in introducing NCA to the larger research and education communities.

Our work on EPB involved several initiatives, and one is still in use today. In an effort to appeal to all NCA members, we strengthened relationships with the Community College and Four-Year Divisions by developing and distributing a convention supplement highlighting the available teaching and training programs offered. We also worked to establish relationships with state Offices of Public (OPI) Instruction to offer teachers continuing education credit for attending teaching programs at the convention. Sadly, this never came to fruition, as working with each state OPI was cumbersome at best.

One of the biggest thrills of my life (aside from birthing my son in 1987), was my election as NCA Second Vice President in 2007. I immediately began planning the 2008 convention, and chose the theme “unCONVENTIONa!” Little did I know at the time how that selection of theme would come back to haunt me!

Convention planning began smoothly. The team went to the Manchester Hyatt for a site visit. I was most impressed with the property—it was beautiful, and was an excellent location for a convention anticipating 4,000 attendees. As the site had been secured in 2001, seven years prior, hotel rates would be low, and I was anticipating a well-attended convention where everyone would have a great time in a lovely location. Little did I know that “my” convention would be ignited with controversy!

During the site visit, we learned that a Union organizer had been advocating unionization for the housekeeping employees at the Hyatt. While we knew that could be an issue for some of our members, we were taken by surprise to learn that Doug

Manchester, owner of the hotel, had contributed a large sum of money in support of a ballot initiative to place a constitutional referendum banning gay and lesbian marriage on the California ballot in November 2008, known as Proposition 8. The Union organizers seized on this donation to encourage NCA and other professional associations holding their meetings at the Hyatt to cancel immediately. They bombarded the NCA office with lengthy phone calls, sat outside of our N Street location with a bullhorn shouting messages to cancel the meeting, followed NCA employees when they left the building for lunch, calling out their names on the bullhorn, and tried on at least one occasion to forcibly enter the office building knowing that they were unwelcome. The tactics they employed to get us to cancel our meeting were most uncivil. NCA's contract with the Hyatt was binding, and if we canceled and/or moved the convention, it would have been costly for the association.

Things with the Union heated up in Missoula as well, where the Union continued to employ tactics that were ugly and unreasonable. At a rally by the local GLBT community in defiance of Proposition 8, Union organizers distributed a flier that read, something along the lines of, "Betsy Bach supports Doug Manchester. Call her at 243.4293 and get her to cancel the conference she is holding there." As a union member myself, I was stunned that a union in California would come after me in my Montana hometown. Luckily friends at the rally alerted me to the situation and came to my defense, as did my colleagues, with a letter to the editor in our local paper (Hayden, 2008).

A small, but vocal group of NCA members also protested our meeting at the Hyatt. They posted calls to CRTnet for us to move the convention, and when we made the decision to remain at the hotel, promised to plan a boycott of the Hyatt. It was here that my training as an officer came in very handy. My armadillo armor was thickly in place, as were my mediation skills. We listened closely to what members were saying, understood that there was going to be a boycott, and made as many accommodations as we could without putting the Association at risk. President Art Bochner was superb in his efforts to help me adjust the meeting to meet the needs expressed. We moved some panels off of the hotel site so that people would not have to cross informational picket lines. We organized several panels to highlight GLBTQ concerns with Manchester's donation. That said, I was sadly disappointed to see that a small group of Association members did not recognize the steps we took as good faith efforts to balance the concerns of members with the financial and other obligations of the association. I believe we did the right things in trying to enact that balance.

After all of the issues surrounding the Manchester, I was anxious to become President in 2009 and put my efforts into carrying out my Presidential Initiative and to seeing the association grow and prosper. We planned to lay the groundwork for a major fundraising campaign, and I was excited to revise a project initiated by President Martha Watson—to revise the Guidelines for Program Evaluation and Assessment, and then to develop materials for department chairs so that they would have standards and criteria for their programs. Luckily, I was able to complete this initiative before dealing with a situation that I never anticipated—transitioning from one Executive Director to another.

Managing this transition took up a large part of my Presidency. In my opinion, hiring Nancy Kidd was one of the best decisions made by the EC during my tenure.

Once Nancy was appointed, we worked together on many association tasks. These included completing a new strategic plan, appointing a Centennial Committee for the 2014 annual meeting, enhancing the breadth of our advocacy efforts, establishing a yearly review process for the Executive Director, and appointing new member working committees. I left the presidency feeling very satisfied at what we had accomplished.

I enjoyed many things about my presidency and my NCA service but three things stand out. First, I became acquainted with hundreds of colleagues from across the globe. I also developed and solidified several lifelong friends, including the “Western Women.” Without the strong friendships I formed while serving on the EC, my life would not be as rich. Finally, serving in a leadership capacity for NCA and watching the association grow and mature provided me much satisfaction. Advocating for a discipline that has a profound impact on every aspect of our daily lives was a very rewarding experience. I am most fortunate to have had this remarkable opportunity!

References

Hayden, S. (2008, November 28). Stop and think before accusing others. *The Missoulian*. Retrieved from http://missoulian.com/letters/fri/stop-and-think-before-accusing-others/article_4a9dcdd3-9eee-54dc-a566-5afbbd8e2f44.html