

Judy C. Pearson, President of the National Communication Association, 2002

Background

The oldest child of two, I was born in the southwestern corner of Minnesota in Pipestone. My parents were innovators and early adopters of new ideas. Both born on farms, they moved from Pipestone to Mille Lacs Lake—one hundred miles around and a walleye breeding ground--in the center of the state on my first birthday. My mother—strong-willed and fiercely independent-- and my father—a twin, fourth in a family of five, and amiable—made a good team as they purchased and developed a resort on Lake Mille Lacs. As a result of hard work and very long hours, they became more financially successful than any of their siblings.



My middle name—Cornelia—was also my mother’s middle name and the first or middle name of all of the oldest daughters in my family throughout history. The Cornelia women were a very unique group—each had achieved notable accomplishments. Some (like my mother) behaved like men and drove semi-trucks or farmed. Others (like my great grandmother who bore 19 children) had huge numbers of children and were models of femininity.

Neither of my parents went to college. Indeed, my mother dropped out of school after the eighth grade to work on the family farm. My father did the same thing, but then went back to school in his late teens and graduated in his early twenties. The Forman family (my father’s family) valued education and had both academic and athletic achievements that were limited only by the lack of finances. The Forman cousins (fourteen of us) are all college educated, and many have advanced degrees. The group includes a number of professors, teachers, writers, and attorneys.

I learned a variety of lessons as a girl. Perhaps the principal lesson was the importance of hard work. I began bussing tables at 5 a.m. during our busy fishing seasons at 5 years of age. I helped clean cabins, wait tables, and do whatever jobs needed to be done at our resort. My academic achievements were probably a result of the praise that I received at home and at school for being a “good worker.”

I also learned about diversity because of the large number of tourists from multiple backgrounds from Minneapolis-St. Paul and the states adjacent to Minnesota. I am confident that I would not have had these opportunities in most other small towns in Minnesota. I recall clearly the July day when the Civil Rights Act was passed and several black people traveled from Minneapolis to “test” our restaurant. I literally shook when I waited on them. Since we had always served everyone, my nervousness was based on the momentous occasion, not because the diners were African-American.

Finally, I learned how to interact quickly and successfully with other people because of the nature of the resort business. Our customers were probably the same as people anywhere—when they were on vacation, they expected no problems and they were always correct! I was active in high school, but always felt like an outsider. Indeed, I learned the term *auslander*, or outsider, as a high school student from one of my German friends who explained that most

people had roots in the area for generations and were not “transplants” as was my family. I managed these feelings of not belonging by being a cheerleader, serving as the editor of the school newspaper, acting in several plays, assisting on the yearbook staff, and participating in forensics.

Undergraduate Education

At St. Cloud State University, I was a student senator, was active in theatre, had a regular radio program on the campus station, and participated in individual events on our forensics team. Our “umbrella” speech and theater department encouraged a wide variety of activities. As a “student radical,” I joined others in protests and traveled to the University of Maryland for a National Student Association annual meeting. On this occasion, I met Senators including Frank Church, Bobby Kennedy, and Ted Kennedy and radical thinkers including Timothy Leary.

I dabbled with a number of majors in college. As a female undergraduate in the 1960’s, I began school as an elementary education major. I soon learned that other subject matter was more interesting and changed majors twelve or thirteen times. I graduated with a major in Speech and Theater, a minor in Philosophy, and many classes in both Math and Psychology. The Speech and Theater department was attractive initially because of the performance possibilities; later I was intrigued by the positive and practical nature of the discipline.

During my senior year in college, I met and married David Pearson. Although I had been accepted at Indiana University on a Direct-to-Doctorate program (spawned by the National Science Foundation and the race with Russia over space), I learned that I was pregnant and would have to postpone graduate school.

Graduate Education

A year and a half later, with a toddler in tow, I began graduate work at Indiana. Jeff Auer was my advisor and mentor. Auer made it possible for me to complete my Master’s degree with only one semester on campus and the rest of my education “done at a distance.” Two years later, with another new baby, we moved to Bloomington for two years, and I completed the course work for the Ph. D. I completed my dissertation year, while holding a full-time job at Bradley University, with two young children while my husband was stationed in Germany.

Early Job Opportunities

During the next few years I realized that my marriage had been an error, though the two children we parented were a bonus. After a lengthy divorce, I supported myself and moved from one institution to another seeking stable and successful employment. As a single parent with little financial support, I was keenly aware of the need for a permanent position. My first full time position after the doctorate was at Purdue University at the Fort Wayne campus. I next succeeded in gaining a competitive basic course director’s position at Iowa State University. In addition, I met and married Paul Nelson. His two children from a previous marriage and mine were blended and two new children that we parented over the next four years completed our large family.

Influences on my Career and Development

Many people in the profession, most notably Paul Nelson, influenced my decisions and helped guide my professional life. Paul serves as the “governor” on my engine—helping me to avoid

spinning out of control. He also co-authors books, papers, and other projects that I am eager to initiate, but am less interested in completing. Finally, he remains my principal support—always eager to confirm my latest ideas, to move across the country, and to remain delighted by all that happens to us.

James McCroskey influenced my development, too. Jim critiqued my first paper in a summer ICA conference in August, 1973, in Athens, Ohio. I presented an early quantitative study, which Jim praised. Another panelist had authored a humanistic essay which I thought was brilliant but Jim criticized because of the method of inquiry. When the chair of the panel asked if any of the panelists had remarks to share, I recall arguing with Jim both over his excellent review of my paper (which I felt was fairly ordinary) and his highly critical review of the humanistic paper (which I deemed exceptional). This sort of candor has probably marked my professional behavior.

A similar event occurred the next spring in May, 1974, when I delivered my first Central States convention paper at Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The paper focused on the abyss between scientific and critical methods of knowing. I identified Gerald Miller and Edwin Black as proponents of each method. Imagine my surprise when both scholars were in the audience when I presented the critique. Their scholarship was only matched by their graciousness. Both men, particularly Gerald Miller, continued to serve in a guide for me in my professional life.

Personal Qualities

As a person from the upper Midwest, I see myself as hearty, hard-working, independent, and generally free of gender stereotypes. As a communication professional, I see myself as a bit of a performer, but very practical. I believe that my organizational and planning skills have been central to my success. I know that having a sense of humor has been helpful.

Service to the Discipline

Before I ran for the SCA Presidency in 1989-1990, I had served in a variety of roles in the organization. I served in all of the major roles in the Instructional Development Division (IDD), including the Chair. I chaired the Basic Course Committee for three years and the Short Course Committee for another three years. I served a number of times on the Nominating Committee. I was a member of the Legislative Council and a member of the Committee on Committees. At the regional level, I served in the four officer roles of the Central States Communication Association. I was President of CSCA the year that I ran for SCA President. Prior to those roles, I received the Central States Outstanding Young Teacher Award and later served on the selection committee for the award. I was also on the Speaker's List for the Association. At the state level, I served as a member of the board of the Iowa Communication Association and as Editor of the Iowa Journal of Communication. I was also a member of the Executive Board of the Speech Communication Association of Ohio.

I lost the 1990 SCA election to David Zarefsky. Zarefsky was a well-established scholar and Dean of Communication at Northwestern University. Although we are the same chronological age, Zarefsky had far more leadership experience. Nonetheless, after the initial disappointment, I took comfort in the fact that the election was quite close. My respect for David continues to grow and I am especially appreciative for his role in representing the National Communication Association on the American Council of Learned Societies.

Jeff Auer, always a man of wisdom and vision, sought me out for a leadership role the following summer. Jeff was passing the Presidency of the World Communication Association on to Ron Applbaum, and he and Ron asked me to serve in the role of Secretary General (four-year term) which could well lead to becoming President (four-year term). I agreed, and those eight years were instructive and interesting.

In my World Communication Association officer roles, I helped to plan and to implement conventions in South Africa, Canada, Costa Rica, Malaysia, and Thailand. In addition, I spoke in Korea and Japan at national conventions. I met many interesting people and debated global issues. Perhaps more important, I learned how to subsume my own approaches and agendas to those of other cultures, countries, and belief structures.

Popularizing Research

The decade of the 1990's was also marked by a new form of scholarship for me. Though I had been fortunate to have best-selling textbooks and articles in journals like *Communication Monographs* and *Communication Education*, I had not written trade, or popular, publications. My first effort in the trade market with *Lasting Love: What Keeps Couples Together* received national attention and I appeared on CBS *This Morning*, the *Jenny Jones Show*, *Sally Jesse Raphael*, and many other television programs. Again, these experiences added a different dimension to my leadership skills.

1999 NCA Presidential Bid

I decided to run for National Communication Association President in 1999 after serving in additional NCA roles: Most notably, Chair of the Educational Policies Board and member of the Administrative Committee. The vantage point that I have now, with these roles, and the others at WCA and national television exposure, prepared me for the position. I was far more mature and centered than I had been a decade earlier. I also feel more balanced and secure.

My platform in 1999-2000 considered the opportunities for the discipline in the Twenty-first Century. I observed that the creation of new knowledge had never been more important, that educational changes and opportunities had never been greater, and that service needs in urban and rural areas were abundant. I suggested that people continue to seek our expertise as they raise concerns about the loss of connectedness, commitment, and civility.

Using the established NCA strategic goals of strengthening the organization, advancing the discipline, and enhancing the visibility and impact of the field from the document *Communication 2000: Advancing into the 21st Century*, I identified some potential ideas to achieve those goals. For strengthening the organization, I discussed increasing the commitment of members by learning of impediments and obstacles to active membership; seeking to expand and extend NCA's multicultural efforts and programs by providing additional avenues of communication between, and among, caucus leaders, officers, and unit heads; encouraging stronger relationships among individuals in the international community and NCA as well as pledging continued support of cooperative work with other communication associations.

To advance the discipline, I encouraged us to commit ourselves to supporting efforts to improve the quality of academic communication programs; to respond with qualitative recommendations in alterations in teaching and learning as changes occur in technology, student demographics, and advancements in disciplinary knowledge and in learning theories; to encourage the development of summer conferences that will focus on individual areas, or contexts, of the

discipline and will develop curricular material for those areas; to continue conversations with graduate education leaders—including department heads, graduate chairs, and graduate deans—to maintain a leadership position in advancements in graduate education; to focus attention on the pedagogical needs of non-traditional students and adult learners to determine the models and methods most appropriate for this burgeoning population; and to continue to seek and improve upon effective teaching and learning models for people across their lifespan. To enhance the visibility and impact of the field, I offered three recommendations: Increase the attention that is paid to our knowledge base through multiple outlets to reach traditional and new audiences; consider, with appropriate units including the Interboard, the possibility of creating a new publication for non-academics; and identify a specific plan to disseminate research-based information on communication topics to the general public on the NCA website and in other media.

In the 1999-2000 campaign, I ran against Robert Ivie, departmental chair at Indiana University. Ironically, Indiana is where I received both my M. A. and Ph. D. degrees. Also, ironically, Jeff Auer passed away during the campaign, and I traveled back to Bloomington for the first time in 25 years to speak at his memorial service. Both Bob Ivie and I were on the platform to honor this hero of the discipline. I have great respect for Ivie and learned to appreciate our differences as we traveled together across the country.

Leadership Weaknesses and Strengths

My leadership “credibility” problems probably focus on my interest in applied research and practical matters. I may have a credibility issue because of my strong interest in extending knowledge to popular audiences and to beginning communication students. A great deal of my work has been focused on writing 30 basic and intermediate communication textbooks. I have also had some success in writing for lay audiences and multiple newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs have featured my work. For example, I appeared on television programs including CBS This Morning, ABC Sunday Night News, the Jenny Jones Show, and the Sally Jesse Raphael Show. My research was reported in USA Today, the Chicago Tribune, Newsweek, and TV Guide. Scholars in the discipline could dismiss me on the grounds of being too applied.

My perceived strengths are three-fold. I am an extremely hard worker. Perhaps the best gift my parents offered was that all is possible through hard work. Beginning as a little girl, I learned the value of rising early and working long hours. As a single mother, I typically awoke at 5 a.m. so I could write for two hours before my children needed to be awakened for school and before I needed to go to the University. I continue to work long hours on a variety of tasks.

I have strong organizational skills. I can do multiple tasks simultaneously and I need different research projects, book projects, and service activities at the same time to retain balance. My ability to analyze, synthesize, and determine priorities is very strong. A source of humor for friends and family is my tendency to organize the simplest elements of my life—my wardrobe, food in the kitchen cupboards, and books in our library--in recognizable sequential ways for ease in use.

I am a risk taker. I am very sincere in not wanting to have multiple regrets at the end of my life about experiences that I have not had. I have jumped out of an airplane with a parachute, I have flown my own single-engine plane, and I have walked on a high wire fifty feet above ground. I have appeared on television before 17 million people, I have joked with Prince Charles on

national television, and I appeared with national leaders in other countries where women do not have the respect that they do in the United States.

I have not succeeded at everything that I have tried. I have experienced one bad marriage and one that is very good. I have been loved and mentored by people in our discipline and I have, in turn, loved and mentored others. I have been disappointed by relational failures and I am sure I have disappointed others. Similarly, I have succeeded and failed in my writing, speaking, and even campaigning for the Presidency of the National Communication Association. A Taoist saying suggests that we should treat winning and losing the same, but parenthetically I would add that winning does seem better.

Teaching and Administrative Experiences

I have taught and administered at many institutions. I began collegiate teaching at Indiana University, and then went on to Bradley University, Purdue University, Iowa State University, Michigan State University, Ohio University, Virginia Tech, and North Dakota State University. My university administrative experiences include serving as the Basic Communication Course Director, the Director of Graduate Studies and Research, President of a campus American Association of University Professors, Associate Dean of the Graduate School, Director of a Campus, and Associate Dean of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

Research and Publication

I have had a rewarding career in research and publication. In addition to the 30 books (in all editions) mentioned earlier, I have published over 60 articles in such journals as Communication Monographs, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Adolescence, Communication Education, Human Studies, and Psychological Reports. I have also had the pleasure of presenting 300 professional papers on interpersonal, gender, family, intercultural, mediated, and instructional communication.

The areas of research which have been most satisfying include trying to answer the questions that surround how people maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships. The popular book, *Lasting Love: What Keeps Couples Together* demonstrates that interest as do articles in Communication Monographs, the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, and Communication Research Reports as well as chapters in several edited volumes. A second area of interest focuses on children, adolescents, and family members. Most recently we have conducted several studies comparing family communication practices around the world. I also have maintained an interest in the influence of gender on communication and on instructional communication issues throughout my career.

A representative sample of my work, by area, is included at the conclusion of this essay. The reader will observe that I have done rhetorical, phenomenological, qualitative, and quantitative research. For me, the question determines the method. At the same time, my worldview is rooted in a fairly knowable world in which we seek to observe and to predict.

Connections with Other Professionals

The connections that I have with other women academics are many. The last few women NCA Presidents are friends and colleagues who have provided important footholds for me. When Anita Taylor sought signatures for a petition to run for President of NCA, I was delighted to add my name to the list. As colleagues in Northern Virginia for five years, Anita provided support at every juncture. When Beverly Whitaker Long chaired the Committees on Committees, I served

as a member of the group. Judith Trent has continued to be a friend and a mentor (even though she claims to be younger than I am) through thick and thin. Judith's political wisdom steered me through the unsure waters of the most recent campaign for NCA President. Sharon Ratliff needed a home for six months while she was teaching in Northern Virginia and we were happy to share ours—even though she was teaching for a competing institution. Sharon and I also enjoyed four years of international travel together as she served as Secretary-General and I served as President of the World Communication Association.

I have had many wonderful female colleagues at multiple colleges and universities—women from English, women's studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and even engineering. Finally, I have had the privilege of watching a number of young women blossom into scholars and outstanding teachers. Most of my graduate advisees have been women. For example, I have chaired 34 master's theses, 24 of them were by women. Similarly, I have directed 19 doctoral dissertations and 15 of them were written by women.

My mentors include the Indiana trio of Jeff Auer, Bob Gunderson, and Ray Smith. Gerry Miller gave me a stained glass window inscribed, "Along the way, take time to smell the roses." Anita Taylor, Judith Trent, and Sharon Ratliff cleared the trail. Contemporaries like Judee Burgoon, Isa Engleberg, and Linda Moore have walked side-by-side as we continue to serve the discipline in multiple ways. Paul Nelson continues to guide me through his love and acceptance.

The NCA Presidency

I ran for SCA President and NCA President because I felt I could make a contribution to our discipline and to the Association. My experiences, my knowledge, my organizational skills, and my enthusiasm all led me to that place in time.

I had the pleasure of planning the 88th Annual Convention in New Orleans with its theme, "Communication in Action." Dwight Conquergood of Northwestern University served as the Carroll C. Arnold Lecturer speaking on "Communication in Action: Capital Punishment in America." Convention-wide Keynote Conversations on the Grand Challenges that face our discipline allowed scholars and practitioners to debate essential topics such as corporate social responsibility, meaningful relationships and health, the death penalty, life in the digital age, engaged communication, the war on terrorism, and civic engagement.

Service-learning Experiences in the Community marked an entire day at the convention. In an unprecedented move, community partnerships were demonstrated through actual service-learning experiences in the New Orleans community. Although the activities took two years of planning and preparation, many NCA members and their students participated in an off-site and ongoing community project.

The 88th Annual Convention included a record number of 1252 programs. More important, nearly 5,000 people attended the conference (4,791 to be exact), which broke all previous records including the meetings in Chicago. This record is relevant because as convention participation increases, so does membership.

Many features of the convention changed. Perhaps most notable is that a new job fair replaced the antiquated Placement Center. The Job Fair was opened to all NCA convention attendees. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) booklet was created to assist newcomers in navigating the large convention.

During my four officer years, the Executive Committee and the Legislative Assembly together wrote and endorsed a new mission and a new strategic plan. In my Presidential year, 2003, we passed a Constitution and Bylaws that should serve us well as more people will be involved in governance than ever before.

NCA members gained more access to the association through the actions of the governance bodies during these years. The NCA Website was redesigned and included the capability of searching the site by keywords. The planning of the convention and the convention program migrated to an online system. Members now have more access to the program and multiple planners have more influence on the final program.

For me, the symbolic meaning of the Presidency was the next contribution--not the final one--to be made to the discipline. I was thrilled to be able to serve in the Presidential roles and I remained in the "precious present" each step of the way.

What I was able to do as President includes opening the association to multiple voices. I was eager to move the theoretical to the useful; the researched findings into practical application. I am hopeful that these few years will be remembered as a time when our discipline made a difference in the world that is experienced by those inside, and outside, of the academy.

A Representative Sampling of Research by Judy C. Pearson

Gender Research:

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Interpersonal and Family Communication Research:

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