

## Sharon Ratliffe, President of the National Communication Association, 1995

By Sharon Ratliffe, from *Review of Communication*, 6(3), 246-251.

Born in 1939 in Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, I carry the label of “Depression baby.” I was the “apple of everyone’s eyes” since I am an only child. I was an only grandchild on my mother’s side until I was in my teens.



My mother dropped out of high school when she was 16. Later, when I was a junior in high school, my high school English/drama/speech teacher, Ruth Hunter, helped my mother enroll in a local community college and after she completed about 12 units with grades of “A.” Ruth Hunter contacted the high school my mother attended as a youth, requesting a regular diploma for her. The diploma was granted. While my mother did not continue her education, she changed from working in retail sales to being a bookkeeper for a hotel.

After graduating from high school in Dexter, Missouri, my father went to college on a football scholarship intending to major in English; however, he quit after the first football season and did not return. Proud of the fact that he never missed a pay check during the depression, my father managed a grocery store and then took a position as security officer for General Motors, Cadillac Division. He retired from this position.

I spent a good deal of time with my maternal grandparents throughout my youth. My grandfather retired from General Motors—Cadillac Division. He designed and applied personalized monograms to cars for people throughout the world. With the advent of the assembly line, his creativity was replaced with simply spray painting cars as they passed by on a conveyor. After retirement, he remodeled homes and built garages. My grandmother was a homemaker and excelled in bringing the out of doors to life with colorful plants and vegetables. Both were as eager to teach me their crafts as I was to learn them.

During my early years, I can remember looking forward to spending each weekend with these grandparents at their home, which they built themselves. Both grandparents were eager to let me follow in their creative, artistic footsteps, teaching me any of their skills that I expressed an interest to learn. At a very early age, I became an expert gardener, thanks to my grandmother’s patience. My grandfather encouraged me to work at his side as he designed and built the garage and maintained the house. Often, the three of us would work side-by-side on projects, even before I started kindergarten. Because of my grandparents, I did not learn to differentiate work from play and I didn’t distinguish between work for women and work for men. Work simply needed to be done.

After they sold their home, my mother’s parents lived with our family for approximately five years until I was in my teens and then they bought a home that was a short walking distance from our home. They remained an integral part of our immediate family. These grandparents were my first mentors. The monument to their efforts is a three-story house in the Tehachapi mountains in California that I built with Ruth Hunter, my former high school mentor who was now my colleague at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, California. Building the house was a

seven year project that will always require more finishing touches. It never occurred to me during the construction process to ask whether I was capable of the effort. And, when others ask me how two women could ever have conceived of such a project, I usually respond with, "When applied, a PhD can do wonders!"

In high school, my initial goal was to drop out as soon as I became 16 years of age – I was bored with learning from books. Ruth Hunter, my English/drama/speech teacher, asked me to student direct the high school play. My first words were, "But I've never even seen a play, how can I direct one?" I liked the speech class that I was in so I agreed to try. I soon became hooked – forgetting to drop out. From directing this first play, I learned that putting on plays meant I could "build houses." I became excited about constructing scenery and lighting more plays. In fact, my grandfather got involved in helping me build a fireplace and ceiling for one play. I was very involved in the drama club throughout high school.

From this experience, it was expected that I would submit my name to be a speaker at the high school graduation ceremony. After all, Ruth Hunter not only directed plays, she was in charge of graduation ceremonies. I can remember being the last of four student speakers. My message was brief, encouraging fellow graduates to strive beyond the ordinary; and if their life's work ever felt like work, I suggested that they should look for a different occupation.

As a freshman in college at Wayne State – on a scholarship that Ruth and a counselor applied for and received for me – I lasted 9 days before I quit. I went to work in a bank and soon learned that a life of shuffling credit references was probably as boring as sitting in the classroom. I learned early on that, for me, applied learning situations in which I was physically involved and which had practical application was critical. This awareness which was first learned when I was an apprentice to my grandparents while completing their chores and projects, led to a career of going to college part time or full time but always while working full time.

I completed a year and a half at Wayne State University in Detroit while continuing to work in a bank. Toward the end of this period, I traveled with Wayne State to Western Michigan University to participate in a state contest in extemporaneous speaking. In fact, Judith Trent, who was enrolled at Western Michigan University and who became NCA President in 1997, competed with me in this contest. Judith finished first and I came in second. I was impressed with Judith's ability and also with the comments given to me by the judge who turned out to be Judith's coach, Deldee Herman. I was also taken with the beauty of the campus at Western. The next fall, I promptly transferred to Western where I became involved in theatre activities – acting, lighting, staging, costuming – because laboratory work was an integral part of the many required speech courses that were designed to graduate majors who were generalists and could develop sound speech programs in the secondary schools. While I acted in one play, my major interest and main activities continued to be backstage – designing, building, and lighting stage sets.

I didn't choose the speech discipline; I fell into it. I started college expecting to prepare for a career "backstage" in the theatre and took speech classes from Mrs. Elizabeth Youngjohn at Wayne State who was the mentor of my high school teacher, Ruth Hunter. The environment was comfortable and the most obvious thing to do with an accumulation of courses in speech was to add to them to courses in English and then teach. Very little thought process was involved – I followed a common, established pattern.

As I came to the end of my bachelor's degree, however, it became quite clear that my time and energy went into speech courses; not into English courses. After all, the speech courses were

applied and practical. I could be involved with my hands! Therefore, when I started applying to graduate school, speech was my chosen field. I applied to Northwestern University and was awarded a fellowship in children's theatre. For one semester, I attended classes and worked with Professor Rita Criste in costuming plays that involved students at an Evanston junior high school.

After one successful semester, I returned to Dearborn, Michigan to live with my parents and finish a master's degree at Wayne State University. My reasons for this move were complex; however, three stand out: I didn't feel that I was of an equal calibre with other students in my classes, economically, socially, or intellectually; although the students gave me no reason to react in this manner and my grades were excellent. Because my abilities were appreciated, I was offered the opportunity to teach full time in a local junior high school and I felt overwhelmed by the idea of teaching and continuing classes when I felt inferior to other students. Going home meant I could save money and go to Wayne State. I felt comfortable at Wayne because I had previously attended classes with students who were successfully earned graduate degrees while working full time. I believed that being at Wayne State would increase my chances of finishing a master's degree.

With a master's degree in hand, I was invited back to Western Michigan University to accept a teaching position. Ironically and thankfully, my new office mate was Deldee Herman – Judith Trent's former debate coach and one of my mentors while I was an undergraduate student at Western. In January, 2001, I was invited by her children to give a eulogy at Deldee Herman's funeral. The experience of writing the eulogy vividly reminded me that the theme of Deldee's professional life – “giving service to the profession” – had become my own theme. It also reminded me that the moment I decided to run for the presidency of NCA was when my mother looked me in the eye and said, “Well, I just want to know how you're going to explain to Deldee that you're refusing to run for president!” I taught at Western Michigan eleven years and completed a Ph.D. at Wayne State while working full time at Western.

Throughout my teaching career, I consistently held a variety of service roles both within the colleges and universities in which I taught and within professional associations. Prior to the sequence of offices leading to the presidency of NCA, I served as member and one-year chair, Educational Policies Board; chair of the Instructional Development Division; chair of the Community College Section; Editor of Reviews for *The Speech Teacher*; and secretary of the Elementary/Secondary Interest Group within the old structure of the Speech Association of America.

I served as President in 1995 at the age of 55. I was single. My perspective as president was to add no further projects, but to examine, improve, and give members access to the governance process. As I look back, this focus on process had the result of opening the Association to individuals who might not otherwise have served (e.g., a high school teacher as chair of the Finance Board, a community college teacher as chair of the Research Board). Orlando Taylor credits the “access” flavor of my presidential speech as the reason he was elected in his second, successful bid to become President.

I suspect my leadership “credibility” problems, if any, were related to my passion for applied scholarship and my position in the community college rather than in a university during my term of service. I believe my strengths stemmed from an ability to be inclusive of varied viewpoints and people of varied backgrounds. I had no university administrative experience. However, I served as Assistant Chair of the Speech Communication Department at Ambassador College, Pasadena; and Chair of the Speech Communication Department and Director of Staff

Development at Golden West College. While each of these were faculty positions, the position in staff development released me 100 percent from the classroom for a decade and the administration, faculty and support staff treated me as though I was an administrator. My connections with other women academics grew after I was elected. My mentors were primarily women academics. As Secretary General of the World Communication Association, I worked closely with Judy Pearson, who was WCA President as the time. This position and relationship paralleled my successful election with NCA. I had a host of mentors. As an only child of parents who did not complete college, I sought advisors as soon as I entered college and being mentored became as much a way of life for me as did mentoring others.

Ruth Hunter, who was my high school speech teacher in Dearborn MI, was the first person I recognized as a mentor. However, as I reflect now, a third grade teacher, Judy Sandberg, functioned as a friend and my first mentor outside of my family. Deldee Herman, teacher and then colleague at Western Michigan University and long time friend, was a second important mentor. Zack York, who chaired the department when I was a student at Western Michigan and who hired me as an instructor when I finished my M.A. at Wayne State University, was an important mentor and is still a close friend. Dorothy Kester (deceased), who was Director of Children's Theatre at WMU and with whom I lived during my senior year, influenced me to begin my M.A. at Northwestern and become a graduate assistant in Children's Theatre at NWU where she received her doctorate.

George Bohman, adviser for my masters and doctoral degrees at Wayne State was a very close friend and mentor. Ed Pappas and Raymond Ross were on my masters and doctoral committees and served as close colleagues more than as mentors because of our relationships through the Michigan Association of Speech Communication. In fact, the officers in MASC at all levels of education served as a community of mentors and professional family at one time or another and MASC is still my Michigan home base.

I became an NCA officer primarily because Deldee Herman, who taught "Methods of Teaching Speech in the High School" at WMU, required The Speech Teacher as one text for the course and expected students to become involved in MASC and beyond. When I return to WMU as a faculty member, Deldee took me to national conventions and saw to it that I became active in state, regional, and national associations. It was this mental set that "professionals give back to the profession," instilled by Deldee Herman, that resulted in my saying, "Yes, I will place my name on the ballot" the morning after I had said, "Thank you for thinking of me; but, no, I would prefer not to run for SCA president." In all fairness, my mother and father were good friends with the Hermans, too. Had my parents not been visiting me from Florida at the time the call came, I might not have called back the next morning to reverse my decision. It was my mother who questioned my choice which resulted in my re-thinking overnight the belief I hold and have passed on to my students: "Professionals give back to the profession." Consequently, Jim Applegate and I ran for the SCA presidency in 1992.

The week after we were named to the slate, Jim and I had a telephone conversation regarding each of our plans for campaigning. Having no intention of campaigning, I shared with Jim that I would attend only one regional in the west, since this was my usual pattern. Jim indicated that he would attend the two regional conferences at which he was delivering papers – Southern and Western. While serving as president was truly an honor, I truly did not seek the role. When asked to run, however, I did feel committed, after some encouragement from family, to serve the profession in this manner. For me, then, the symbolic meaning of the presidency is the obligation to serve. While I enjoyed the experience immensely, I did the commitment more as an

obligation than as a privilege or opportunity. The obligation was as much to my past mentors as it was to the field or to the Association.

In speculating as to why I was elected, my first thoughts go to the words of the chair of the nominating committee, who reported that I had been nominated by several people. I can only assume that such calls came from both the central as well as the western region where I spent the two halves of my career. Perhaps it is because I was professionally active in both regions that I garnered a breath of support. It may also be possible that I was supported because between Patti Gillespie's 1987 term and mine, men had been elected for eight consecutive terms. In addition, it had been 14 years since Anita Taylor ran in 1981 as a candidate from a community college. While I was teaching at a community college at the time of the election, I also had taught in three university settings. That I have a reputation for taking on work and following through in ways that are inclusive might also have influenced those who voted for me. I suspect I was elected, in part, for at least each of these reasons.

My primary goal as president was to create access where it did not seem to exist and to share knowledge about how to gain access where it existed but was not perceived to exist. The annual meeting of the Committee on Committees was one setting in which I could realize this goal. Each year, I was instrumental in filling positions of board chair with what might be called non-traditional candidates – a high school teacher for Finance Board, a community college instructor for Research Board, an Afro-American for Finance Board. When I chaired the Committee on Committees in my presidential year, I was proud to report that we had an abundance of candidates to choose from for all positions. I believe this resulted from my articles in SPECTRA that explained how to achieve access to leadership roles within the Association. I think it also occurred because members saw that non-traditional candidates were, indeed, being named to key positions.

Whenever I had the opportunity to chair meetings, I promoted consensus-building. I believe it is accurate that a vote was not taken during either of the Administrative Committee meetings nor the Committee on Committees Meeting that I chaired. I truly believe that one effect of employing decision-making by consensus is to confirm the equality of all participants which encourages them to take advantage of the access they have to the decision-making process to become responsibly involved. I have heard that some in the Association might say I was too successful in manifesting this belief into action.

My scholarship and/or research interests were primarily in the area of communication education and teacher preparation. My most significant contribution to scholarship and research in the discipline was in the area of communication skill assessment for native and non-native speakers of English and the development of laboratory means of conducting skill assessment by trained peers as well as community volunteers in a one to one setting. Publications directly related to these interests are identified in the selected list below.

After writing this, I'm find myself amazed at some of the contradicting descriptors that I use here to characterize myself: assertive, shy, sensitive, strong, bold, perceptive, objective, cautious, risk-taking, optimistic, creative, a follower, a leader, diligent, argumentative, a peace-maker. It has also been an interesting exercise to look through a rearview mirror at my professional life. The pattern in my academic and professional career of replacing a lack of personal self-confidence with the confidence my mentors had in me is a powerful endorsement for the importance of the mentoring process. Finally, I find it very satisfying to know that probably Deldee Herman's most significant professional legacy is that Sharon Ratliffe and Judith Trent started in a teacher's college in a place called Kalamazoo and became two of the first dozen

female presidents of the National Communication Association. In hindsight, it all seems so logical.

### **Representative Publications:**

#### *Books*

M.A. Oberhaus, S.A. Ratliffe, and V.R. Stauble. *Professional Seeling: A Relationship Process*. Forth Worth TX: Dryden Press. 1993.

S. A. Ratliffe and D.D. Hudson. *Communication for Everyday Living: Integrating Basic Speaking, Listening, and Thinking Skills*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1989. (A Speech Communication/ESL Textbook)

S.A. Ratliffe and D.D. Hudson. *Skill-Building for Interpersonal Competence*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1988.

#### *Videotape Series*

S.A. Ratliffe and M.O. Oberhaus, Producers. *Professional Selling: A Relationship Process*. Dryden Press. 1993.

S.A. Ratliffe and D.D. Hudson, Executive Producers. Holt, Rinehart and Winston *Group Problem Solving in Action*. 1991.

*Public Speaking in Action*. 1991.

*Interpersonal Competence in Action*. 1989.

S.A. Ratliffe and D.D. Hudson. *Interpersonal Competence Series*. Produced by Golden West College; Distributed by Wadsworth Publishing Co. 1989.

S.A. Ratliffe and J.W. Bryan. *Test Out Instrument for Interpersonal Communication*. Produced by Golden West College, Distributed by Golden West College Development Office 1983.

#### *Chapters in Books*

S. A. Ratliffe. Implementation in *The Wingspread Conference on Communication Competencies*. Annandale VA: National Communication Association. 1990.  
*Articles in ERIC*

S. A. Ratliffe. Strategies for Assessment of the Basic Undergraduate Interpersonal Communication Course. ED 310 831. 19p.

D.D. Hudson and S.A. Ratliffe. A developmental Approach to Speaking and Listening skills in the Multi-Cultural Classroom ED 291 262. 1988.

S.A. Ratliffe and D.D. Hudson. Involving Community Volunteers in a Competency-Based Program to Teach Speaking, Listening, and Pronunciation Skills to Non-Native Speakers of English. ED 282 410. 1987. 14p.

S.A. Ratliffe and D.D. Hudson. A Description of a Student-Staffed, Competency-Based Laboratory for the Assessment of Interpersonal Communication Skills. ED 283 409. 1987. 21p.

S.A. Ratliffe. Interpersonal Communication and Peer-Tutor Evaluations in the Speech Laboratory. ED 251871. CS 504 780. 1984. 29p