

## **Beverly Whitaker Long, President of the Speech Communication Association, 1985**

By Beverly Whitaker Long, from *Review of Communication*, 6(3), 228-231.

I enjoyed a privileged childhood, privileged in the sense of being wanted for a long time. When my Mother gave birth to a stillborn girl in 1932, she was told not to try it again. But two years later they did, and I came home with parents who wanted more than anything to have a family. When I was four, my brother Johnny was born. The family was complete: the four of us plus one grandmother, one grandfather, four aunts and three uncles, their spouses, and eventually thirteen first cousins. There was much affection, little money, and faith in a bright future.



The family, the church, the farm, the school--these were my dad's priorities. He was a fiercely independent man who began farming with forty acres which, over a thirty year period, grew to a thousand. His formal education ended in high school, but he never stopped studying farming methods, consulting with county agents, and adapting to new technology. It was fortunate that Mother was a teacher, both because she was a gifted one and also because when crops failed, there was still a bit of dependable income. They were both enterprising workers and committed to making things better.

We lived in a recently built three-room house with a red roof in the country, about 22 miles South of Jonesboro, and 60 miles from Memphis, Tennessee. Daddy farmed; Mother taught 4th, 5th, and 6th grade at a nearby country school. It was a good, uncomplicated life in that little house. Then we moved to town (Harrisburg,) population then and now of 1900. The house was bigger and located about midway between the church and the school. Daddy served many years as secretary of the school board, church treasurer and chair of committees to build a new church and parsonage. The school would add a public school music program, started by Mother, and a hot lunch program also begun when she was president of the PTA.

Mother went to school in summers and earned a B.S. in the 50s. In 1967, the same year I earned a Ph.D., she was awarded an M.S.E. in Early Childhood Education. All her adult life she served as church pianist and organist. She was actively involved in the lives of families in the Harrisburg area: playing organ or piano for church services, weddings, funerals; teaching first third grade and then public school music. When she directed Christmas pageants she usually cast me in the lead because I liked "play acting" and she needed an at-hand performer.

My brother Johnny was golden in early days and throughout his life. So cute he once won a baby beauty contest, so smart he was an honors student from pre-first-grade on, and such a good high school athlete that he depleted my resources when I announced I'd give him \$10 for every touchdown he scored. He attended Hendrix College, as did I, then medical school, and became an internationally acclaimed neurologist, specializing in multiple sclerosis. His wife Elaine earned a Ph.D. in English Literature at NYU; his son Jeff a B.A. from Williams and an MBA from Wharton; daughter Amy a B.A. from Williams and an M.B.A. from Yale; daughter Stacey a B.A. from Amherst. The educated family that my dad dreamed of long ago was a reality.

To Mother's dismay, I was not an outstanding student in high school, neither valedictorian nor salutatorian in a class of 44 students. I was very busy and happy being in plays and operettas and cheerleading. What 16 year-old could want more? During my senior year the physical education teacher offered a speech class. I loved it and there met the first poem I really liked, Sara Teasdale's "Barter." At Hendrix, I majored in Speech and Drama and during my sophomore year, fell in love with literature (Willa Cather's My Antonia, Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome, Amy Lowell, William Allen White, Dorothy Parker, James Thurber). I also felt the full power and magic of staged drama in a production of Oedipus Rex as a member of the chorus. I cried at each performance.

At Hendrix I also earned a degree in Business. I'm not sure exactly why except that I liked accounting when it meant working with big ledger sheets--the illusion of control, I guess. I was business manager of the college newspaper and managed the campaign of the senior class president. With his victory, I was named to the senate.

The primary influence during this time was Ella Myrl Shanks, director of drama at Hendrix, a sophisticated, motherly figure who encouraged me then and for years to come to "just do your best." My first teaching job was at Newport (Ark.) High School; I taught three ninth grade English classes, two speech classes, directed junior and senior plays, and even did a bit of speech therapy. Here I began a career of working with male administrators (Superintendent Castleberry and Principal Davis) who valued and rewarded my work. They gave me much support and boosted my confidence in my teaching and directing abilities.

At LSU where I received both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, I was, unconsciously perhaps, very much influenced by the leadership style of Waldo Braden, department chair. He was a rushing bear--full of advice, a bit frightening in his intensity, and ever ready to help students. He was, I realize now, what would be described as a masculine "benevolent dictator." My chief academic influences were different. Francine Merritt, enigmatic and private, was the most widely informed person I'd ever met, and she made oral interpretation both a pleasure and academically significant. Fabian Gudas, professor of English, taught courses in literary criticism. I took four of them and left armed with exciting and invaluable tools that would evolve later into theories of describing and evaluating literary works and literature in performance.

In my first college teaching at Southwest Texas State in San Marcos, I encountered two more nurturing male administrators, Elton Abernathy, department chair and Jim Barton, director of the theatre. I was hired to costume four major productions a year, direct children's theatre, teach introduction to speech (four sections each semester) and oral interpretation, and if I were lucky, team up to teach an interdisciplinary theatre appreciation class. I never learned so much as I did working with Elton and Jim and also with faculty from a wide variety of disciplines, an association made possible by the size of the institution. Perhaps the major discovery of this period was my realizing that although I was committed to performance, the texts I was most attracted to were poems and narrative. From that point on, I was focused on the performance of literature.

At LSU and at San Marcos, I discovered the pleasure and power of my women colleagues. I'm not sure I've ever made a professional decision without discussing it with Mary Frances HopKins and Gredna Doty (and later, Mary Strine). They were--and are--collaborators, questioners, enablers. Never pushy or judgmental, they profoundly affected my thinking and my practices. I learned from them what "feminist," in its richest sense, meant.

While at San Marcos, I attended my first professional convention, the Texas Speech Association

in Galveston. It was fun and I got to see Robert and Gertrude Breen perform “Miss Brill,” in a style they called Chamber Theatre. The next year I took students to the Southern Speech Convention in North Carolina. In 1966 I attended the National Convention of Teachers of English, and, in 1967, my first SCA convention where I delivered a paper on aesthetic distance. Since that time, I’ve missed few Southern conventions (serving as president in 1975) and no national ones. The conventions were always energizing and often inspirational.

In 1968, I met Bob Jeffrey, new chair of the Department of Speech at the University of Texas. He was my boss, adviser, soul mate, friend, even cast member. He knew how to get things done, and he knew what was worth doing. He was open, kind shrewd, and visionary. And he generously shared his wisdom, making him a mentor of the highest order. He (and his wife, Phillis) encouraged, advised, even pushed, my work in SCA. He was on the nominating committee (along with Dennis Gouran) that asked me to be a candidate for the 1985 presidency.

By that time, I had left the University of Texas to be with my husband, Bill Long. Some colleagues were amazed that I could give up a professorship at UT and move to Indiana. I loved Texas but there was no contest. In 1977 Bill took early retirement, a decision that coincided with my being offered a job at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I thought I was going there to be a full-time teacher/researcher, but what the department needed was a chair and I was the most likely candidate. Most of the faculty were much younger than I, so it was challenging and rewarding to support them in building their professional careers.

In SCA, I served on all sorts of committees, first in the Interpretation Division and later in Association appointments. My induction into the Administrative Committee was as a member and then chair of the Research Committee, where I watched, admired, and learned from Karlyn Kohrs Campbell.

When I was elected second vice-president, candidates did not “run” in the sense they do today. There were no regional convention appearances, no speeches; in fact, it was expected that one would not even seem to be campaigning. I doubted that I would win because I was a woman and neither educated nor employed in a Big Ten school. I did, however, have support from a variety of places: Texas, where I had taught at two institutions and served as an officer in the State association; the Southern region where I had been very active; in the Interpretation Division; and among women. My opponent was Jim Andrews from Indiana University, a charming man whom I only recently met. Somewhat ironically, this (Fe)mentoring project led me to him because he once taught with Magdeline Kramer, the subject of my essay.

During my tenure on the Committee on Committees with its frequent opportunities to make appointments, I worked to increase the presence of women. I also worked to increase the visibility of the arts-performance-literature tracks of the association. I wanted performance to be mainstream, or at least respected, not marginalized. My chief effort was directed toward the creation of a new journal, which happened eventually with the substantive contributions of Bob Jeffrey, Mary Frances Hopkins, Jim McBath, and Kathleen Jamieson.

Another of my goals was to recognize teaching in a manner similar to the way we already recognized scholarship. To that end, I asked Jody Nyquist and Mary Margaret Roberts to create the first “Teachers on Teaching” programs. Also, I re-instituted the Past Presidents gathering (after a period of financial austerity) because I thought the association and the national office would be more secure when this group of committed former leaders knew each other and met annually. I also initiated a Task Force on Related Organizations, which, for a time, established contact with other professional organizations primarily through convention program exchanges.

During my presidential year, I spent a good deal of time trying to assist in “holding things together” in the national office where there was illness, confusion, shortage of money, and general unease. I was helped greatly by my colleagues at the University of North Carolina who worked on Association matters and, more important, gave me the opportunity to practice leadership by chairing the Department. I was blessed by an abundance of help from my husband, Bill. A retired IBM manager, he not only made coming home a joy, but he also made work better with his calm listening and astute commentary on whatever the issues at hand.

My general sense, when I left the SCA office, was that I had helped make something good a little better, and I felt good about that.