

Judith S. Trent, President of the National Communication Association, 1997

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Born in a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan, my mother and I lived alone (although her parents lived only a few blocks away) until she remarried when I was in the sixth grade. It was a loving home and my stepfather rapidly became my father.

There is little question that my mother was the dominating influence in my pre-school childhood. She worked full-time as the administrative secretary to the superintendent of the school I attended (our house was right next to the school). I stayed with my grandmother during the day, and probably because life at my grandparents could be boring, I learned to read when I was three. At four years, I had read the complete Bobsy Twins series of books and by the time I started kindergarten, my book reading had progressed to the Nancy Drew girl detective series.



Education was a major value of my parents, especially my mother. Unlike my stepfather, who had had several years of college, my mother had never had the opportunity to go beyond high school, in spite of the fact that she was the valedictorian of her high school graduating class. She grew up in the depression and after high school had to work to help support her parents and younger siblings. From kindergarten through high school, it was expected that I would do well academically. And because during grade school my mother worked at the school and knew all of my teachers, she heard all the news about me (good or bad) before I even got home. While I remember each of my grade school teachers as good, fair and competent women, none really stands out in my mind as having particularly influenced me. Throughout those years, I took the “usual” lessons (piano, voice, and dancing) and was involved in the Bluebirds and Campfire Girls associations. I went to camp for several weeks in the summer, “practiced my piano” all year round and was generally caught up in the activities of grade school. And I still devoured all books I could find—by now having “advanced” to historical novels. In junior high and high school, my activities expanded greatly. I tried cheerleading, liked it, and stayed with it through high school and served as captain of the squad my junior and senior years.

The really eventful part of junior high and high school was that I entered the world of communication—at that time, speech. A social studies teacher, by the name of Charles Stone had the idea to put together a debate and forensics team. He selected eight 7th and 8th graders (seven males and me). Together we eventually became fairly respectable debaters and individual event participants. We went to all of the local tournaments at other high schools and the various colleges and universities in Michigan. As I recall, we pretty consistently won our league championships and I also did well in individual events, including declamation, original oratory and extemporaneous speaking. By that time, Charles Stone had retired and a man by the name of Blanton Craft took his place as the speech teacher, drama teacher and debate coach. He did a great job and years later, after we both had Ph.D.s in the discipline, we were able to renew our friendship at NCA meetings each year. I think he was pleased when I became NCA President.

Although, in high school I participated in a variety of activities including the school plays, drama club, honor society, cheerleading, and student government, it was debate and forensic events that were most important. In fact, it was through forensic activities that I came into contact with another mentor, Deldee Herman from Western Michigan University. Deldee heard several of my high school debates and recruited me to Western Michigan to debate for her on the Women's Debate Team. Even in those years, separate women's and men's debate teams within one university were highly unusual. But, after meeting and talking with Deldee, I knew that it would be a wonderful opportunity, particularly as I had spent junior high and high school as the only female on the debate team.

So with a scholarship for tuition, fees, and books in hand, off I went to Western Michigan University, (just 50 miles from my home) to major in speech and minor in English and History. From the beginning, I loved the Department of Speech. However, Deldee was frequently somewhat exasperated with me because I not only debated but participated in original oratory, got involved in campus politics (I ran for president of the freshman class after having been at the University for two days), became an officer in the United Nations campus organization, became campus president and the regional vice president of College Young Republicans, and had roles in three or four campus theatre productions. Something had to give, and so my junior and senior years I did not debate but continued in forensic individual events. Deldee was great about it and she remained a mentor long after the time I graduated from Western.

Following graduation, I took a position at Belleville High School (a large consolidated school between Ann Arbor and Detroit, Michigan) teaching Speech and English. There had been no debate or forensic program but the superintendent was eager to get a program going. His encouragement and backing—especially in funding the activity (even in terms of purchasing a station wagon for the school so that I could transport the debate team from tournament to tournament) was phenomenal. Although the students in the district did not, by and large, come from families who were college educated, or who had, in fact, even heard of academic debate, by the end of the first year over 20 students were participating. By the second year, I was teaching only speech courses and coaching debate, and the debate and forensic programs became part of the community with the students speaking regularly at the local service clubs, and the service clubs sponsoring individual students to go to various university summer debate workshops around the country. We also put together some kind of public performance each year as a fundraiser for the speech and debate programs. The debaters presented a melodrama and the individual event students presented their declamations, readings, and orations. The superintendent, Harold Wetherall, was always in attendance at those events and was certainly in the audience the two years the debaters were in the state debate finals. The year the students won the state debate championship was my last at Belleville. During those years I had been active in the Michigan speech communication and debate associations and a number of university colleagues were telling me I should go on to graduate school.

I had become well acquainted with the faculty in the Department of Speech at the University of Michigan and so decided to accept their offer. I never regretted the decision and thought graduate school was one of the best things that had ever happened to me. There were no women on the faculty to serve as mentors, but the men, such as Howard Martin, Bruce Gronbeck, Kenneth Andersen, William Sattler, C. William Colburn, and William Donaghy were the best mentors a student could have.

Originally, I had intended to get a master's degree and return to high school teaching. Everyone talked me out of my plan, helped me secure a generous fellowship from the Ford Foundation

(Michigan's graduate school titled these the Rackam Prize Fellowships) and I went ahead and received the Ph.D. in 1970.

I am, however, a bit ahead of my story because in December 1969, the day following my comprehensive examinations, I married Jimmie D. Trent who was at that time in the Speech Department at Wayne State University.

As I was finishing my dissertation and looking for a job, Jimmie and I came face-to-face with the problems faced by two-career couples in the 1970's. Several communication department heads at major universities said they would hire either of us but not both of us. Finally, I took a position at Youngstown State University and Jimmie stayed at Wayne State. While I enjoyed my first year out of graduate school, it was abundantly clear that living apart during the week was not how we wanted to live. Subsequently, Jimmie took the chairmanship position in the Department of Communication at Miami University and I went to the University of Dayton in the Communication Arts Department. We established our home in Oxford (where Miami is located) and in 1975 we adopted a six-year old child.

The thirteen years I spent at the University of Dayton were rewarding. I moved up the professional ranks pretty much "on schedule," was the Department's Director of Graduate Studies, established and directed the first public relations major within a communication department, served on a variety of college and university committees, continued research and writing in political communication, and worked on a part-time basis in the University's independent research institute.

During these years, I was actively involved in the Ohio Communication Association (OCA), the Central States Communication Association (CSCA), and the National Communication Association (NCA). In CSCA, I chaired the rhetoric and public address interest group, with Ellen Reid Gold founded the Women's Caucus, and served as president in 1982. During these years, I also served on a variety of NCA committees. One of my fondest memories of the CSCA work was having the opportunity to plan the Association's 50th anniversary convention. In 1983, I was selected to be an American Council on Higher Education (ACE) Fellow in Academic Administration. It was (and is) a yearlong program designed to provide a twelve-month educational program in university administration. I left the University of Dayton to spend the 1983-84 academic year working with the President of the University of Cincinnati, Henry Winkler, an excellent administrator, a highly respected scholar, and a wonderful mentor. Before the year was over, it became clear that the University of Cincinnati was a "good fit" for me and with the understanding of my Dayton mentors did not go back to the University of Dayton after my fellowship year was over.

I took the position of Associate Vice President for Research and Advanced Studies and worked for a woman who became a friend and mentor. Eula Bingham was and is a highly respected toxicologist who served in President Carter's administration as Director of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

Although I was heavily involved in my University job and in research and writing (during my first year at Cincinnati, the first edition of *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices*, co-authored with Robert Friedenber, was published), I was also enmeshed in several NCA activities. I chaired the Task Force that later became the Political Communication Division, chaired the Public Address Division, chaired the Association's Nominating Committee and served on and chaired a variety of award committees. A few years later, I was nominated and ran for Second Vice President. I lost the election and was unhappy because as a student of

political communication, I was “out campaigned.” It is also true that I was one in a series of women who had lost and were to lose NCA presidential (second vice president) elections. In 1992, I was appointed to the Association’s Finance Board, a three-year appointment that has, on occasion, served as a springboard to the NCA presidency. I ran for president while serving as chair of the Finance Board and it was the first time in NCA’s history that the two nominees were women. The other candidate, Martha Watson, was at the University of Maryland at the time and we were and are good friends. In fact, as I became Second Vice President, Martha was appointed Chair of the Publications Board, and we served on the Association’s Administrative Committee together for three years.

Certainly, the nomination of two women to compete for the Association’s presidency is noteworthy. It had not happened before and did not happen again until 2006 when two women ran for Second Vice President.

I enjoyed the years as an officer because I saw those offices as opportunities to move the discipline forward. In fact, “Advancing the Discipline” was the slogan on the NCA pins I gave to members during my trips as President in 1997. As Second Vice President, I appointed two task forces, one to examine and press for increased racial diversity in the discipline, and the other to develop guidelines/material/procedures that could be used by communication departments to increase their visibility, credibility and centrality within a college or university. Each task force made recommendations for Association actions that were put into place in the following two years.

As First Vice President, I had the opportunity and challenge to serve as the primary planner for the 1996 annual convention. The convention was to be held in San Diego and because of Proposition 270 many NCA members thought we should not meet in California. In addition, even without the problems inherent in Proposition 270, convention attendances had always decreased for all past NCA conferences held in California.

We planned some special activities for the convention including a protest march and candlelight ceremony that celebrated diversity, athletic events (the Association’s first tennis and golf tournaments), special programs and events sponsored by textbook publishers, and a “prime-time” series of 17 programs called “At The Helm” that featured some of the discipline’s most distinguished scholars. The papers from the 17 programs became a book I edited which was published by Allyn and Bacon. *Communication: Views From the Helm For the 21st Century* was distributed at the 1997 NCA Convention.

As President, there were at least five items I hoped to advance – and to the largest extent they were the reason I had agreed to run for the presidency a second time. These included a positive vote of the membership to change the Association’s name, acceptance into the American Council of Learned Societies, revitalizing the relationship of the discipline’s doctoral programs with NCA, bringing back the doctoral honor seminars, and focusing the Association’s summer conference on racial and ethnic diversity. Each came to fruition during my presidential year. I find it difficult to provide some self-descriptors because out of the context of specific situations they can seem contradicting. But here goes. . .high energy level, self starter, task oriented, emotional and sentimental, efficient, responsible, impatient, honest, loyal, high work ethic, likely to “take charge” if “things” begin moving slowly or there seem to be no goals and objectives, and non confrontational unless pressed.

As noted earlier, I enjoyed the offices I held in NCA. I believe that my years of experience in upper level university administration increased my understanding of leadership. I realized the

importance of following projects through to their completion and acquired some skill in talking good and competent people into taking on tasks they might otherwise not have undertaken. In the largest sense, when describing my years working with disciplinary associations as well as the years spent in academic administration, I failed to address the area of academic life that has been of singular importance to me – my research and scholarship. Beginning with the first quarter in graduate school, I knew that the focus of my research would be communication and elective politics – especially presidential politics (the area of research and scholarship now known as political communication had not yet been defined). And while over the years I have authored, co-authored or edited books and book chapters, academic journal articles and “zillions” of communication conference papers, I believe that my most important contributions have been the analysis of the rhetorical advantages of challengers in political campaigns (originating from a journal article, which was co-authored with Jimmie D. Trent), the concept and description of “surfacing” (the first stage in political election campaigns), and a series of co-authored articles published in the *American Behavioral Scientist* that analyze the results of New Hampshire field study research on the characteristics of the “ideal” presidential candidate from 1988 through the 2004 presidential primary. In my mind, the other most important scholarly contribution has been the book, *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices*, which is co-authored with Robert V. Friedenberg, and which, in 2007, will be in its sixth edition. *Political Campaign Communication* made a difference because it was the first book-length study of election campaigns that utilized the principles and practices of communication to examine elective politics, the book has been characterized as a “classic” and as a “seminal work in the field.”

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