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# INTRODUCTION

**W**hy did I choose to study Engineering? How did I become an engineer?  
How did I overcome adversity?

This is my story—highlights, really, of my journey. I hope you enjoy it. I hope you find inspiration to continue your journey.

*~Shelly R. Born*

# SET UP

“Would you like to go with me to an IEEE-USA conference in Arizona over Labor Day weekend? When we return, you’ll have to prepare a report for the Section and possibly give a short presentation.”

Arizona!!? “Yes! Absolutely!”

That invitation, and my acceptance of it, set this book into motion more than 27 years ago. I was about nine months into my engineering career. A seasoned female engineer had reached out to me, and she invited me to join her passion for pre-college math/science education, known today as STEM. In the coming years, we created a community outreach program, where a 5th- or 6th-grade classroom could “Adopt an Engineer” from our company—to come in monthly to participate in a classroom activity, or give a STEM demonstration. For me, the highlight was to be an astronaut for a day, while participating in a Challenger Space Shuttle mission with my class.

I got involved with IEEE—first volunteering for my local Central Indiana Section as pre-college education chair, newsletter editor and student section liaison, then moving up to a bigger position. Before I knew it, my name was on the ballot for an IEEE-USA Board of Directors position.

But let us back up to that first conference in my favorite state. It was a meeting at which IEEE-USA Professional Activities volunteers shared accomplishments and lessons learned from the past year, and then strategized for the coming year. For me, it was a crash course in learning the breadth of IEEE-USA in affecting careers, technology policy, education—and much more.

During the conference, a recurring theme emerged: IEEE Student Membership was strong, but regular membership dropped off until about age 35. How could we attract more professionals in the early parts of their careers?

The last session was an open forum, and a young woman eloquently posed a valid issue for discussion. But the moderator and the panel—all of them older men—dismissed her point. Their comments to her made it painfully obvious that they thought this was no place for a woman.

Afterward, another member—a man—pulled aside four younger people, including me, for a quick discussion: Something was needed to attract younger engineers to the organization—and we were appointed to do it.

Together, we brainstormed how to address the needs of young professionals, and we became a committee.

After meeting several times around the country, we created the IEEE Young Professionals Conference to run alongside the annual IEEE-USA Professional Development Conference. We selected topics, recruited speakers, and promoted and facilitated it. After the first such conference, the Young Professionals Affinity group was launched throughout the United States. Soon, it was renamed GOLD (Graduates of the Last Decade), and it expanded worldwide.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Take a chance and say “yes” to opportunities, even if you do not know all that you are getting into.
- Mentoring is valuable. Seek out a mentor if you do not have one, or if no one has invited you. Also, seek out another person, and offer to mentor them.
- You get tremendous value out of something when you invest yourself in it.

# FOUNDATION

I come from a family with a strong work ethic and perseverance through hardship. My dad's parents owned and operated a furniture store with help from their three sons. My mom's parents owned and operated a large farm, with the help of their four children.

At first, my parents took a different route. They studied to be artists, then trained to join the Peace Corps; and until I arrived, worked in Bolivia. My father became an art teacher, and he also did construction. My mother taught exercise and art classes, was elected to the school board, and became president. They also volunteered, always doing something to help others—whether plowing snow from driveways, providing food or friendship, or hosting and placing exchange students from around the world.

They bought and tended a small farm in Madison, Indiana, with help from my sister and me. We learned responsibility and self-sufficiency—as well as seeing both how hard work pays off; and how working together bonds us.

My mom's mother taught me a special lesson. She had ALS, short for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive neurological disease. When she was first diagnosed, she was given only six months to live. Throughout her suffering, she maintained a positive attitude and a perpetual smile. She refused to give in—and lived another 14 years!

## Lessons Learned

- Growing up in the country, I attended a rural school and a little church. We did not have money; but we had all we needed, and our lives were rich. I learned what mattered most was people, because we all need each other.
- My parents and grandparents taught me to take ownership of all that I did, and that I could accomplish anything I put my mind to doing.
- I come from a line of strong women. They did not give up, or give in, when life was tough. I don't either.