

Diane Kewley-Port

Professor of Speech and Hearing Sciences and of Cognitive Science

From all reports, everyone who knew Diane Kewley-Port as a child took for granted that she was going to be a scientist. What they could not have foreseen was that her journey towards a scientific career would take her along an unconventional path to preeminence as a speech scientist in a specialized field called speech comprehension.

Diane's affinity for science may have been acquired from her father who was an engineer/scientist for G.E. in Cleveland, where she and her two siblings grew up. Her path from Cleveland to an accomplished career in science was strewn with obstacles. One was that girls were not expected to perform well in math and science classes; but Diane excelled. Her father's patient influence must have been a welcome counterweight to this kind of prejudice. In her junior year of high school, she was accepted into a summer camp for aspiring young science prodigies organized by Northwestern University. This experience confirmed a love for science that she and her father shared as they drove to engineering schools to look for one that would fit a young nonconformist. The next obstacle in Diane's pursuit of a scientific career came at one Ivy League university, where she was told that while she was obviously an outstanding student, women were not welcome in engineering school. They finally chose Dad's alma mater, Michigan, and, three and a half years later, she graduated as the only woman engineer in a class of 600. She stayed an additional year to take a master's degree in communication and computer science.

It was during this time that the second major "obstacle" to Diane's journey appeared in her life in the form of Bob Port (professor emeritus of linguistics). Bob and Diane were and are the definitive proof that opposites attract. Their loving union nevertheless presented several additional "obstacles" for Diane to overcome in her scholarly journey. They began a family and were frequently on the move while Bob pursued his degrees in linguistics at Johns Hopkins, Columbia, and finally the University of Connecticut. Diane took her first professional job in what was to be her eventual field: as a research associate for the Neuro-Communications Laboratory under the supervision of Rachel Stark and Grace Yeni-Komshian. This is where her passion for speech science was kindled. She applied technical skills that were uncommon at that time to study infant hearing and communication. Her potential was noticed by Michael Studdert-Kennedy and Katherine Harris, two eminent speech scientists from Haskins Labs, perhaps the premiere speech-perception laboratory in the world. After the birth of Diane and Bob's first child, Nicholas, Haskins hired her to devise innovative methods to study speech. Once the quality of Diane's work became apparent, she was encouraged by Katherine Harris to enroll as her graduate student at the City University of New York (CUNY). Diane's dissertation progress was cut short by the birth of their twin daughters, Juliet and Cindy, and the completion of Bob's Ph.D., which led to their eventual move to Bloomington.

Bob took an assistant professor position in linguistics and Diane found work in David Pisoni's lab in psychology. Through an arrangement with CUNY, Diane finished her dissertation research in Pisoni's lab and obtained her Ph.D. She went from there to Chuck

Watson's laboratory in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences (SPHS) where she began designing and implementing her own studies, marking the formal end of her tortuous journey as a student. She had become the scientist she dreamed as a girl she would be. After a short period, the success of her research activity and her growing reputation in her field led to her being hired as an assistant professor by SPHS. Her productivity and excellent teaching moved her through the ranks, and she ultimately became a full professor.

A hallmark of Diane's research has been its multidisciplinary perspective, using theoretical and methodological tools from speech science, linguistics, engineering, and psychology (among other disciplines). Her research was interdisciplinary long before it became fashionable to be so. Diane has produced landmark studies on speech acoustics, digital signal processing, computerized speech training, and speech perception. More recently, Diane has focused her research on speech perception in individuals with normal and impaired hearing, concentrating on the perception of vowels in particular. This work represents another hallmark of Diane's research: her conviction that basic research should not only inform theory but also have applications in improving communication.

Diane has never drifted too far astray from her engineering roots. Together with her colleagues Charles Watson and Dan Maki, she established Communication Disorders Technology, Inc., a small corporation funded in part by several Small Business Innovation Research grants from the National Institutes of Health. Within this organization, Diane has used her expertise in speech technology and acoustics to develop computer-aided training modules for second language learners and for individuals with articulation disorders.

Having learned to navigate a sea of obstacles to reach her goals, Diane has repeatedly aided others as they embarked on their own journeys. Diane is very adept at taking a student under her wing and offering guidance that extends far beyond the project, the laboratory, and the classroom. This has been especially valuable to the many female Ph.D. students that Diane has mentored. Department colleagues have witnessed Ph.D. students transform under her direction from fledgling novices, insecure in their knowledge and capabilities, to self-confident, well-balanced, junior scholars able to undertake a career in academia with all of the challenges such a career entails. Diane's caring guidance, however, seldom stops there. Diane remains in frequent contact with her former students throughout their careers and continues to help them as needed.

Diane has no intention of slowing down. She recently was elected vice president of the Acoustical Society of America, a position which will allow her to become involved in the American Institute of Physics to help shape national science education. She and Bob plan to volunteer with Operation Smile, which is an international charity to aid children born with facial deformities. Diane will never be away from home for too long because she loves the company of her children Cindy, Juliet, and Nicholas, daughter-in-law Cynthia Lindman Port, and granddaughters, Ada and Josie. Diane, we wish you well on your new journeys!

~Phil Connell, Judith Gierut, and Larry Humes