

Behind the Scenes

Conversations with the editors

by Karen Hawthorne

To celebrate two decades as PEO's official journal, *Engineering Dimensions* recently talked to its editors past and present. We commemorate the leadership and vision that moved the magazine forward as a forum for discussion and a focal point for emerging issues.



Mary Curtis headed up the magazine as founding editor from its debut in 1980 to 1987. In 1988, she became an Honorary Member of The Order of the Sons of Martha, now the PEO Order of Honour, awarded by the association for outstanding service to the profession. She was the first woman staff member to receive the PEO service award for non-engineers. Curtis is now a freelance writer and painter out of her Crescent Moon Studio in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia.

Starting out

"What I do remember clearly from the launch in May of 1980 was the leap of faith it took to move from a skinny, yellow newsprint section in a commercial publication to the in-house development of a 64-page, four-colour magazine that would serve the engineering profession in Ontario," recalls founding editor Mary Curtis.

The driving force behind establishment of the magazine, Curtis worked with the Editorial Board and then board chair, Alex Kobelak, P.Eng., to put together a proposal that Council would eventually approve and applaud—despite initial opposition. After all, there were concerns about tackling such a major publishing project, says Curtis: "Would it truly serve the association and, ultimately, its members? Could staff really develop, in-house, such an ambitious project—and sustain it at a professional level?" Many thanks also go to Editorial Committee chairs Nick Monsour, P.Eng., and Bill Kerr, P.Eng., for helping to make it all happen during the magazine's early years.

Showcasing the profession

Curtis talks of the magazine's inception as a communications vehicle, not only for association news, but also as a showcase for human interest stories about engineers; for news on development of the new Professional Engineers Act, passed by the legislature in 1984; and ongoing discussion on the association's

mandate and whether it should provide member services. The magazine was also positioned to recognize the roots of the profession, providing a historical context for engineering in Ontario.

"Our team was able to produce a very special centennial edition of *Engineering Dimensions* in September 1987," [to celebrate 100 years of engineering in Canada] says Curtis. "We put together the largest issue ever, and included a synopsis of hundreds of major engineering accomplishments, and milestones in the profession. It wasn't exhaustive, but it was a worthy compendium of individual and engineering team efforts."

Field research

According to Curtis, it wasn't all work and no play. She remembers one very chilly assignment in Timmins with the magazine's former art director, Loreta Senin. Curtis was on location to interview mining engineers, while Senin came to get the visual feel of the place. Senin produced a series of art boards depicting various mining buildings and personnel for that issue. "But there was no place for her to sit comfortably outdoors to work on her sketches," Curtis says. "Not daunted, Loreta sat in deep snow to produce, with cold fingers-and butt, some very evocative scenes. How did I make her job easier? It cracked me up and I laughed my fool head off."

Investigative coverage

Next at the helm, Margaret McCaffery saw the magazine's advertising revenue pay its publishing costs—as a result, she says, of timely editorial content and coverage of significant events that affected the profession, like the 1988 Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the December 1989 École Polytechnique murders.

"It was a cataclysmic event and had an enormous effect on the profession and organization," McCaffery says of the shocking murders of 14 young women, most of whom were engineering students. At the last minute, the editorial team had to redo its January/February 1990 issue.

"I realized that this was going to turn a spotlight on the profession. Although it may seem terrible to take advantage of something like that, you had to step up to the plate."

She recalls the massive debate sparked in the organization and the profession: "On one side there were people saying, 'What has this got to do with us?' Then there were others saying, 'Whether we like it or not, these women were engineering students and this means something. And while we've got the world's attention, let's look at what it means. I think that it took the profession on a track that it had not been on before, and it led to

the exploration of all kinds of initiatives that would not have been given much credence beforehand."

Debating free trade

McCaffery also challenged her editorial team to research the Free Trade Agreement's implications for the profession, despite the fact that Council was having enormous difficulty grappling with what the association should or shouldn't do about it.

The magazine took the lead "just by telling the story," she says. "We weren't saying the Free Trade Agreement is a good thing or a bad thing, we were simply saying, 'This is what it is, and this is the impact it's going to have.'" In fact, the Free Trade Agreement provided the economic impetus to harmonize engineering admission criteria and standards across the country, and to facilitate negotiation of mutual recognition agreements with American engineering organizations.

"I think it evolved into a real forum for discussion," McCaffery says of the magazine, proud of its award winning status and boost for the profession's image. "It became a real meeting place for engineers who wanted to reflect on their profession and a vehicle for two-way communication among members."



Margaret McCaffery joined the magazine's staff as editor in 1987, becoming publisher a year later. She read "everything" and oversaw the artwork and design concepts until her departure from PEO as director of communications in 1993. She is now president of Canterbury Communications, based in Toronto.

20 years of experience

"After all this time, it's hard to single anything out," says Connie Mucklestone, publisher and director of communications, of her work with the editorial staff. "It's more of a general impression of enjoying what I was doing, because I was working with a good editorial and production team, and meeting and working with some top-notch professional engineers."

Her favourite magazine issues brought journalism awards and leading-edge coverage, such as March/April 1994's "Engineering on the Homefront," predicting the rise of the Information Highway as a common household tool at a time when many people still thought it was for academics and "techies."

Connie Mucklestone is PEO's director of communications and publisher of *Engineering Dimensions*. A 22-year association veteran, she started on staff at the magazine as editorial assistant in 1978, became assistant editor two years later and then managing editor from 1988 to 1992. She headed up the magazine from 1993 to 1997.





Redefining the territory

PEO's tabloid publication, *The Link*, debuted in 1996 to cover association news and activities, steering *Engineering Dimensions* more toward a focus on the broader issues in the profession, and the association.

"Association publications are often faced with having to meet competing goals, like covering the association's internal politics and activities, while showcasing association members' achievements," says Mucklestone, pointing out that new production processes and a sustained push to market the magazine helped improve recovery of the magazine's printing and mailing costs.

"It's a tough balance, made even tougher by the wide scope of the engineering profession. I think *Engineering Dimensions* has usually maintained that balance fairly well, so that there's something in the book of interest to most readers."

Engineering Dimensions today

The best part of the job, according to managing editor Alison Piper, is working with the editorial and graphics team to develop a quality finished product—"and the satisfaction of seeing a really good idea realized in print." The September/October 1999 issue, "The Skills Shortage," is just one of those ideas. "We covered a topical issue from the engineering profession's perspective from many different angles. I heard positive feedback from readers that they had read that issue from cover to cover."

Deadlines and the daily grind

How does it all work? Authors for each issue are lined up as much in advance as possible, along with material on an issue's theme from background research and editorial ideas. When it comes down to planning an issue, Piper reviews these files and puts together a list of stories, brainstorming with, and assigning work to, editorial staff.

"Late breaking news can be assigned at any point in the editorial cycle—as long as we have time to fit it in," she says, adding, "news can come from anywhere—email, snail mail, fax, newspaper clippings, announcements at conferences, word of mouth, etc."

Editorial staff work closely with the graphics team to source photos, illustrations and other material, and develop concepts for layout. Several pairs of eyes go over each page during proof-reading. On "camera ready" day, the magazine goes out on disk to the printer, which is converted into a digital file from which film is created. "Once we sign off on the final colour proof and the printer makes any final changes, the presses are ready to roll," she says.

Into the 21st century

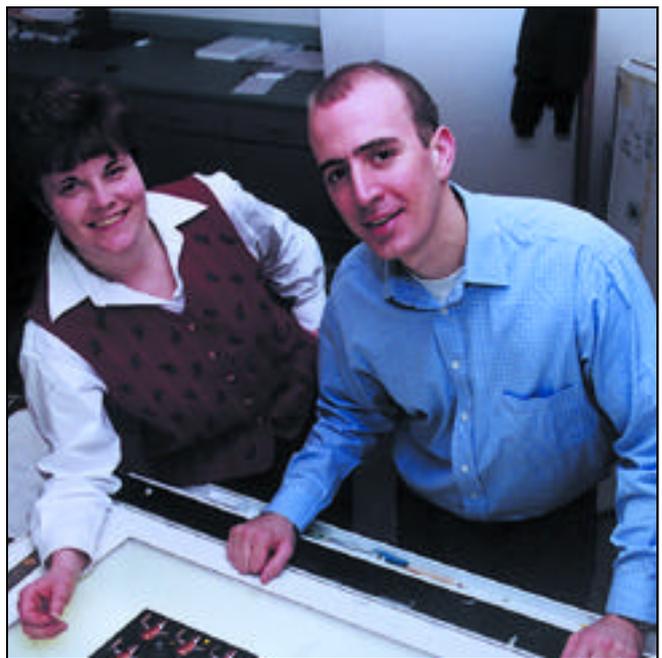
With 10 years' experience at PEO, Piper is up to the challenge of moving the magazine forward with continued updates in style and layout, plans for a stronger internet presence, and feedback from reader surveys, like the 1999 Starch Readership Survey.

"Readers told us they wanted to see more articles on such topics as information technology, international and national issues affecting engineering, and business trends," Piper says of the results. "I try to keep this feedback top of mind, so that we're covering what's important to engineers."

With the impending transfer of PEO's member-interest func-

tions to the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, the Communications Committee will have to review the magazine's editorial mandate to ensure that it's consistent with PEO as a strictly regulatory body, says Connie Mucklestone.

"But still, there's still lots of room for interesting debate on subjects that have an impact on regulation, like emerging areas of practice, exemptions from licensure, relevance of licensure, the code of ethics, access to the profession, low-fee bidding for engineering work, globalization of engineering, engineering education, and on and on." ♦



Current managing editor Alison Piper works alongside Darren Richards, senior graphic designer, to check photo proofs. Alison Piper came on board as assistant editor in 1990, becoming associate editor in 1993. She moved to a research position within the communications department from 1997 to 1998. In April 1998, her name was back on the masthead as managing editor.