

# **SWE GRASSROOTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

## **Suzanne Jenniches Interview**

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## **Suzanne Jenniches Interview**

Suzanne Jenniches began her career as a high school biology teacher after graduating from Clarion State College in 1970. She transitioned to industry in 1979 when she received a master's degree in environmental engineering from Johns Hopkins University. Jenniches conducted extensive postgraduate work in Defense Decision Making and International Affairs at Catholic University and has attended the Harvard Business School Program for Management Development and Executive Management. A leader in manufacturing innovation and producibility engineering for Northrup Grumman Corp. for more than 35 years, establishing many "firsts" for women within the company and receiving several patents. She retired in 2010 as the vice president and general manager of government systems division of the electronic systems sector. A Fellow of the Society of Women Engineers, Jenniches served as its national president from 1988 to 1989 and is a recipient of the Society's Distinguished New Engineer Award and Achievement Award.

In her 2010 SWE Grassroots Oral History Project interview, Jenniches explained how she became involved in SWE and eventually served as national president; challenges the Society faced in the 1980s; and fond memories from her time in SWE leadership.

- July 2016

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**SUE PARSONS:** Okay, good afternoon.

**SUZANNE JENNICHES:** Good afternoon.

**SP:** Would you introduce yourself and tell us what years you were national SWE president?

**SJ:** My name is Suzanne Jenniches, and I was the SWE national president in 1988 and 1989.

**SP:** When did you first join SWE and what made you join?

**SJ:** (laughs) Naomi McAfee made me join, and I joined SWE in 1978. I actually had been involved with SWE prior to that at the local section level. And the Baltimore-Washington section at the time was having a little bit of stability problems. And so I got involved and helped to reinvigorate it and they elected me president. [01:00] When they sent the information on the new officers for 1978 to headquarters, which was in New York at the time, the headquarters wrote back and said, Wait a minute, you can't elect someone president who isn't even a member. They have to be a member, you know. So everybody said, Uh-oh, uh-oh. So Naomi had been threatening me anyway to fill out the membership form. And so what she said to me, very succinct but very powerful, "If you don't fill it out I will, and you'll never live down what I put on that form." So I said, "Oh my goodness, I'll fill it out." So from that point on, I filled it out, I paid my dues religiously until I became a life member. And I still contribute to SWE because I know Naomi and she's deadly serious about this. It was actually a wonderful thing that she did for me.

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**SP:** What was your first leadership role in SWE? How did that come about?

**SJ:** Other than being a non-member president, I sort of worked my way through the ranks at the national level. [02:00] And really, the thing that got me most involved nationally was in 1984, we hosted ICWES, the International Conference of [Women] Engineers and Scientists, I think is the way to—we'll have to check that. And it was held in Washington, D.C. And I was involved in planning for ICWES, and at that point in time I really got to see the governance side of SWE.

Prior to that time I belonged to SWE and I was active in SWE for two reasons. One, because I believe in engineering education. Engineering is a second career for me. I was not an engineer at the bachelor's level. So I felt very strongly about engineering education, making young women aware of engineering as an option. The second was networking. I just had a tremendous amount of fun with all these technical women and so that's really what motivated me. [03:00]

But once I got to see the national governance levels and all that it took to really have a successful national organization, I then served almost every role except for treasurer. And in fact, I remember when I was secretary I carried at that time an entire, gigantic PC with me because it was the first time that we were going electronic. And so I would take the minutes, you know, in real time such that we could get them out immediately following the meeting, if not at the end of the meeting. And so I was so glad to see the advent of the laptop a few years later. But it was a real commitment, and it was for everyone who was involved at the national level. [04:00]

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**SP:** So you've had other leadership roles leading up to being president of SWE.

When did you first think about being president of SWE?

**SJ:** Well, in hindsight, looking back, it really was a seven- or eight-year commitment.

I never really thought about being president of SWE. I just sort of got involved.

You know how they are, they reel you in. I got involved and did more things and then I got involved in planning conferences. And then, in late '86, the nominating committee came and asked me, Would I—maybe late '85, they asked me, Would you run for president elect? And I said, "I don't think so." [05:00] And so I turned them down. Not because I didn't think it was a valuable thing to do, but I was just concerned about the time commitment and where I was in my career, in terms of—I had a job that was very demanding. (laughs) I worked more hours than anyone should have worked, but that was the way things were done at that time. And I just felt like I couldn't do SWE and my job, and there's no question that my job came first. I couldn't do it adequately, so I didn't.

And then the next year they came back again and they said, Would you reconsider running for president elect? And I said, "Well, let me check with Westinghouse, but I'm pretty sure that although they've been extraordinarily supportive of me and all the time and money that it takes to be at the national level, I'm pretty sure the answer will be no, but I will check." [06:00] Well, I went and asked my boss and he said, "Of course! What's wrong with you? Of course, we would support you." And I said, "Oh." I said, "Well, I turned it down last year, you know." And he said, "Well, don't ever do that. You know, this is very important to Westinghouse." And so then I called back and said, "Okay." Well, I

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can't even remember whether it was a contested slate or not because at that point in time we generally did not have contested slates. But, at any rate, I was selected to be president-elect, and then it's almost, not quite but almost an automatic ascension to president.

**SP:** So what was your position at Westinghouse when you were SWE president?

**SJ:** That's an interesting story in and of itself. I was a senior manager and I ran advanced development operations. [07:00] So I did all of the emerging programs, many of them classified. And right after I had been elected, Westinghouse decided to send me to Harvard. And they sent one person from the entire corporation each semester to Harvard, and it so happens that I was admitted to the fall semester. And at that time, the president started their terms July 1. We went from July 1 through June 30. And so I had just gotten a couple of months under my belt and off I go to this very intense program at Harvard that ran six days a week, and you really went from seven in the morning to eleven at night. And I thought, "How in the world will I do this and do SWE?" And so I talked with everyone and they said, "Well, you'll just run it from Harvard." [08:00] And that's exactly what I did. I actually violated the rules of Harvard and left on weekends to go do SWE business and came back and still kept up with all my case studies.

And then, the Harvard stint was over right after Thanksgiving and then I was able to essentially come back to work. And ironically I came back to no job because they had filled my old job. And so I really did have a great deal of freedom the second half of my year as president to do whatever it took to travel and to work.

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And then at that time headquarters was on the East Coast, and so it was very easy for me to run up to New York on the train. And so it actually was—I wouldn't recommend it for everyone to choose to do it this way, but it turned out to be a very productive way to do it for me. [09:00]

**SP:** So Westinghouse was very supportive of your activities. But did they financially support in times—

**SJ:** Oh absolutely, yes. There was never a question. If I had to travel, I didn't even have to ask. I just went and got the tickets, you know, and they of course covered all my time. They also covered a great deal of what we called at that time in-kind services. (laughs) Because we did not—we were just beginning to have a fledgling paid staff at headquarters by my term. And so consequently there was a lot of copying and laying up of articles. At that time we didn't have a conference management company helping us and so you had to prepare for the conference all the materials. And so there was a tremendous amount of in-kind service as well. [10:00] It took a lot for a company to have somebody be president in the eighties.

**SP:** So what experiences prepared you for becoming SWE president?

**SJ:** I think the important thing about the president, even yet today with all of the modern communications, is in fact communications. And I was a schoolteacher, and so you learned how to organize, communicate, try to keep people's attention, you know. (laughs) And then I also was—when I went to engineering school I, of course, learned a number of the principles in problem-solving. And heaven

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knows, as a SWE president you had to solve problems. And then just the program management, the project management techniques that I learned through my industrial career. [11:00] So none of them said, This is what you must do as SWE president. But all of them, in particular some of the worst experiences that you have, all of them taught you how to handle difficult times.

Now, I will say the following. The difference between SWE and working in industry is SWE is entirely volunteer. You have to motivate people strictly by the merits of your argument and it's extraordinarily decentralized. And so you have to figure out how to get people organized, and communicate, and get tasks done when they're spread all over the United States. So SWE taught me a lot, too. That helped me a great deal later in my career when I worked in a very decentralized business, both in the U.S. and internationally. [12:00] So I feel like both my industrial life and my teaching and SWE complemented one another very, very well.

**SP:** So what was going on within SWE when you were president around that time?

**SJ:** That was an interesting time, the eighties. SWE was growing up in the eighties. Naomi and the seventies were very foundational and very, very important and they did have rapid growth. Now in the eighties, interestingly enough, we didn't have as much growth in raw numbers. However, we had growth in a number of other aspects. Now, I'm going to just check a little bit. (looks at notes) In 1980, we started to recognize the importance of various levels of membership, and so the first fellows were inducted into the society in 1980. [13:00] In 1983, we got



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our first paid—(clears throat)

F: Do you want me to get you a water, or—

**SJ:** No, it won't help. But now—I cleared my throat, okay. In 1983 SWE hired its first paid executive director. And so we went from an all-volunteer, part-time kind of situation to a full-time paid executive director. And she in turn brought a staff on. In 1984, as I mentioned earlier, we sponsored the International Conference for Women Engineers and Scientists, and that was a huge undertaking because we hadn't done that for twenty years. And it was following that that we decided we probably need to have a professional conference management organization come in and help us because it was extraordinarily time-consuming on the part of the volunteers. [14:00] Although we made tremendous overage on that particular conference, so it was successful but it almost exhausted a number of people.

Then in 1985, we wrote the first SWE mission statement. And it exists to today in terms of what is SWE beyond the original objectives that were established when SWE was founded, and that's when we started to recognize the value of diversity within the SWE organization membership and within engineering overall. In 1986, it was that we established the Resnik Challenger award, the medal, in recognition of Judy Resnik and the Challenger [shuttle] explosion that occurred the year before. [15:00] And in fact, we were having a board meeting—preparing for a board meeting when the Challenger launch happened, so it left a marked impression on me and a number of SWE members.

And then in 1988 we received the first significant grant. NASA awarded the

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Society of Women Engineers a \$500,000 grant for a four-year program—that actually ended up going almost a decade—for underrepresented minorities in engineering and early intervention programs at the junior high and high school level. And so that was exciting because we were now starting to do sort of groundbreaking kind of work in the area of engineering that impacted not just women but impacted the engineering profession overall. [16:00] So that was a huge step forward, in terms of—for lack of a better word—the professionalism of SWE as a national organization.

Then in '88, which was when I became president, we were having some serious financial stability issues coming into that, so the emphasis was on financial stability. We worked on budgeting and forecasting and making sure that we understood the cost of the programs that we were going to implement. We also developed a formal long-range strategic plan so that we knew when we started a project in '88, it was going to be continued in '89, '90, and '91, and that there would be funding available to support those kinds of strategic projects. [17:00] So that was a very important, once again, infrastructure. I like to think that SWE grew up, if you will, in the eighties into what it meant to run a national organization with a paid staff and not just the passion of our volunteers. Although the volunteers—you can never, ever have SWE without the volunteers because they are the heart and soul of SWE. But they don't have to do all of the legwork, and that was a major lesson that we learned.

Then I also established the Upward Mobility award, and that was to recognize that engineering goes beyond the laboratory or the workbench. It goes into those

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who move up in management and influence the decision-making that influences the work environment for engineers, women and men. And so we recognize the importance of management within the engineering ranks. [18:00]

**SP:** That's quite a change through that decade.

**SJ:** It was an amazing decade. I came in at the end so I can't really say that I had a lot to do with it, but I experienced it and it was an amazing decade.

**SP:** What were your biggest leadership or management challenges within SWE when you were president?

**SJ:** There were several. One was realizing that if you have paid staff, you have to let the staff do what they need to do. And it was very hard for SWE members who were used to going in and running everything to give up what they considered a bit of the control. So how to form that partnership between staff and leaders, I think, was a huge challenge. [19:00] Then, as I mentioned, the financial challenge because we were becoming—. We had to manage a \$500,000 grant. The organization was growing. We did grow significantly. The student numbers almost doubled during that period of time, and the [professional] members grew from about seventeen hundred members up to close to three thousand members.

I will say one of the challenges—but I wouldn't put it near the top—but it's keeping track of our numbers. It's hard for us to know exactly how many members and all of those kinds of things. But establishing computer databases and all of that sort of infrastructure I found to be a real challenge because people

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were used to being far more informal. [20:00] And the concept of having a formal infrastructure many people saw as curtailing their ability to do what they wanted to do, so. But we got over that and we would have never been able to grow. We established the *US Woman Engineer* magazine during that period of time. And we would never have been able to have the products and services that we had then in the nineties and now the two thousands, twenty-first century, had it not been for those challenges that we faced in the eighties.

**SP:** Is that a reflection of what was going on kind of broadly in the engineering community, is the implementation of technology on a really personal level. Not just for large organizations, but really for everyone to use?

**SJ:** The eighties were somewhat of a chaotic time for the engineering community. The defense budgets—and many of our members worked in some way with the defense or with federal agencies—was growing rapidly during that period of time. [21:00] So there was a tremendous boon in terms of opportunities, although you didn't necessarily see it for women. So this was when women were starting to push in, and as Naomi mentioned they went to 10 percent. But during the eighties we also not only were trying to get entry-level positions—which had, I think, been well-established in the eighties—but we were also trying to get upward mobility, managerial positions. And that was not as readily available. And so it was a tumultuous time, I think, in the U.S., and consequently we would see it with our members and with their work environments.

**SP:** So what were some of the big national issues that had an impact and what was

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SWE's involvement, or how did it affect the way SWE worked? [22:00]

**SJ:** Well, we were involved in the diversity issue for the first time, recognizing that there needed, perhaps, to be different approaches to attracting minorities and women into engineering and into increasingly important positions within the workforce. That might be different than what had been effective for the white male engineering population. And so I really felt like we made some real inroads in bringing the diversity issue to the forefront. Recognizing that you needed to have, if you will, a richer environment for women to work in where they could make all the contributions that they were so very capable of doing, and yet recognize that they had other demands on their lives besides just that patent that they were filing. [23:00] And so, it was interesting in terms of, I think, putting together the basis for what came afterwards in the nineties and beyond, in terms of the strength of women in the workforce, the equity pay, and the ability to rise within the organizations—whether it be at the university level to be deans, or whether it is in the industrial workforce.

**SP:** So on a more personal level, what are some of your favorite memories of your year being president?

**SJ:** My, there are a million. Well, first of all, it was a little chaotic because I was at Harvard and then I came out to not have a job. I had a paycheck, but I didn't have a job because they had replaced me in my job. [24:00] And so there were pluses and minuses to that, because as I said I had the freedom to put as much time as I wanted to and SWE needed into my year as president. But it was the

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people—always, always, the people in SWE. That's the thing that has kept me with SWE for decades, is just the association with really bright, technical women who feel passionately about things. That was wonderful.

I will say in '88 we had the Puerto Rico conference and so that was our first offshore conference. And in '89 it was in Oakland and so I was trying to manage the conference across the United States, you know. And so that was wonderful.

[25:00] The northern California sections were extraordinarily organized, and so that was fun. But when I got there I had a little bit of a cold—not unlike I have today—and whether it was pollen or whatever. And so I thought, "Hmm, I should get something, an over-the-counter medicine, because I have a lot of ceremonial things to do here." So I went out and I looked at the drugstore, and I thought, "I don't know. I don't know." So I bought a particular medicine whose name I won't mention here because I don't want anybody to say that it's not a good medicine. It's a good medicine for 99 percent of the population. It turns out I was allergic to it. So I took the medicine, passed out in the shower, got a black eye because my eye hit the shower nozzle, and my throat swelled shut, and I got laryngitis.

[26:00] So I was trying to conduct the annual meeting, the CSR [Council of Section Representatives], the award ceremonies, everything with a black eye. So I simply increased the eye shadow on the other side to try to balance it out. So I looked a little bit like a raccoon, and who couldn't speak. And so I remember that, thinking, "You know what, if I can make it through this, I can make it through anything." So it's probably more memorable to me than it is to anyone else in this Society, but I really felt that no matter what comes at you when you're SWE

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president, you just got to step up and do it. And every president does that.

**SP:** So what is your message to future SWE leaders?

**SJ:** Oh, future SWE leaders. [27:00] I think it's important to maximize our effectiveness, and that means to use every tool available to us—partnerships with other societies, certainly staff, and our paid executive headquarters—to reach out and listen to our members. The same thing that was true in the eighties is true today, and it's a matter of caring in an efficient and effective way. And each year each president needs to think of incremental improvements, not throwing away what was done before—because what was done before is incredibly important and a wonderful foundation—but building upon that to leave SWE better when you retire and become inducted as past president than it was when you came in. [28:00] And I think that's just true for everyone who becomes a leader, regardless of which office it is.

**SP:** So how have you stayed involved in SWE since you were president?

**SJ:** Oh, I like to be involved at the local level. And, in fact, we have wonderful car pools when we go to meetings, and I said even if they cancel the meeting, I would go just for the car pool, because we have such a good time going to and from the meeting. And so those friendships are incredibly important.

I also work on special projects, as requested by headquarters or by the region.

And so I try not to insert myself a whole lot into the leadership of the Society because I think it's time for the next generation. [29:00] And I think that

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sometimes those of us who are affectionately known as over-the-hill remember too much the way it used to be, as opposed to perhaps the way it can be. So I try not to do too much unless invited in. And then when they invite me in I think, “Well, they know who I am, so they’re going to get my opinion.” And I enjoy helping out. Just recently, I worked with SWE on the [Capitol] Hill and we went around to see our congressional—both House and Senate—leaders and staff to talk about engineering education issues and equity for women in education and in the workforce. So I think there’s a million ways that you can become involved and still make a real contribution to SWE. And I encourage everyone to at least work on one project a year where you’re value-added. [30:00]

**SP:** What do you see as the biggest change in SWE since you were president?

**SJ:** Oh, I think the quality of the services. We’re just so much more professional in what we do, and it’s because we have a lot more money. We have a lot more members. We have paid staff that helps us do these things so we’re not all doing them at night on our little PC, you know, and standing in front of the copying machine. And I take great pride in what SWE does now, as a clearinghouse at the national level. I was the chair of the American Association of Engineering Societies in 2005 and I give SWE credit for that. [31:00] And I saw SWE head to head with the strongest engineering societies in the United States, contributing, sitting at the table, participating in the discussions, and it made me very proud to see the growth that SWE has accomplished. And I’ll tell you, it continues to this day. Through the nineties it was a very formative time. And now in the two thousands, once again, still doing extraordinary things that we didn’t even



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envision in the eighties.

**SP:** Well, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today, Suzanne.

**SJ:** Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW