

A Tribute to Pat Horner

Arthur T. Johnson

Published in the BMES Bulletin, vol. 34(1), February 2010.

Pat Horner had one strong spirit. She was a whirlwind with the strongest will of anyone I've known, who not only was in the center of the action – she was the action.

I met Pat in the early 1970's – I don't remember the exact year – when the American Society of Agricultural Engineers asked me as a young bioengineer to investigate their involvement in the Alliance for Engineering in Medicine and Biology. I had recently returned from a tour as an Army captain in Vietnam, and had taken a job at Edgewood Arsenal, in Maryland.

Washington, DC wasn't too far away, so I made an appointment to visit the Alliance office. There I met John Busser, the Executive Director, and Pat Horner, his deputy. I was favorably impressed, and reported back to ASAE that I thought there might be something there for ASAE to be interested in. I don't quite remember the details, but I was named ASAE representative to the Alliance Council.

I was impressed. Around the Council table were bioengineering pioneers such as Francis Long, Dick Gowan, Dick Johns, Les Geddes, Les Goodman, Charlie Weller, and, of course, Pat. I was among giants, and I was just starting my career.

Pat soon became Executive Director of the Alliance, and it soon became obvious that it was she who made the organization tick. The Alliance was a cooperative amalgam of member societies with interests in medical and biological engineering. Pat spent long hours on the phone with the movers and shakers in biomedical engineering. She knew everybody and everybody knew her. She was the centerpiece of the Alliance, the one person who kept the organization running. She was excellent at forming consensus, but, to tell the truth, it was usually her position on issues that prevailed. She was very strong-willed. I knew when I picked up the phone and heard that familiar "Hel-low, Arthur", that I was going to be on the line for at least an hour.

We hit it off pretty well, and her relationship to me that began as a mentor, after a while became advisor, and after that, ally. The progression reflected my growth and maturity, not Pat's. She had early cut her teeth on Republican politics in Pittsburgh, and she knew the ropes. It was I who learned a lot from Pat.

After a few years, I was elected Treasurer, and then Secretary of the Alliance. It was Pat who made sure I was nominated.

When the Nominations Committee passed over me to nominate another person for Alliance Vice President, Pat was not pleased. I asked her advice, and she assured me that, if I petitioned to be on the ballot, she would support me. That was all I needed. I got all the petition signatures I needed, and called all the Council delegates to let them know that I was interested in their votes. I won the first and only contested election for Alliance Vice President, and I won unanimously. I'm not aware of the part Pat played behind the scenes, but, whatever it was, I'm still grateful.

After two years, I was elected Alliance President, and was the first President to serve a term of four years. During that time, it was becoming apparent that the Alliance

was in need of major overhaul. Member societies were terminating membership, and the Alliance was developing financial troubles.

Pat, still the resourceful manager that she was, managed to pare expenses. That meant buying office supplies when they were on sale, reducing office staff and doing more work herself, and getting the best deals at hotels where our meetings were held. There wasn't a hotel manager who could stand up to her. She knew what she wanted, and she knew how far to push to get even better than the best price breaks that they were prepared to offer.

When money was plentiful, Pat could put on the most lavish party at her meetings. When money was scarce, she could put on a party that looked as lavish as the other one, but cost half as much. She was amazingly talented at running a society.

Because of the financial woes of the Alliance, Pat was forced to look for society management employment elsewhere, and went to work for Smith-Bucklin, a firm that managed several societies. Pat took on other society management duties.

It was during this time that we were meeting to form a new organization, the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering (AIMBE). Pat was the Project Director of that effort. Although she didn't become directly involved in AIMBE, she was highly supportive. Her loyalty was with the field of biomedical engineering that she loved, and she wasn't about to give up on it. I still got the calls from her.

We maintained contact through those years, and, when Eric Guilbeau came to me to ask what I thought about Pat as Executive Director of the Biomedical Engineering Society, I told him that there was nobody more qualified. I also told him that Pat had such a strong personality that she would have her own ways to do things. But they would be done well. She was chosen as the second Executive Director of BMES, and the first to manage a BMES office. There she stayed until her retirement in 2005.

We stayed in touch, and had an occasional lunch together. In these years, it was becoming clearer that Pat the physical person was weakening. I once asked her how she liked retirement, and she responded, "To tell the truth, retirement is hell." I think what she really meant was "old age is hell". Despite her physical limitations, she still had the same fire, the same spirit, but her will was not enough to push her body to the extremes that she had been used to earlier in life.

Pat was indomitable. This is the characterization of her I will always carry with me. She had her likes and dislikes, and she made no secret about either. She believed strongly in what she was doing, and the word "strongly" is an understatement. She was a positive force in the early days of biomedical engineering, when the field was just being formulated. She was loyal and consistent, and I shall admire her for that for the rest of my life.

She touched many lives, and nobody came away from an encounter with Pat Horner without being impressed. I can just see her now – telling St. Peter who to let through the Pearly Gates and who to reject. That would be Pat – in the middle of the action.