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Interview with Heidi Kirk Duffy

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Letter to the Editor

Heidi Kirk Duffy

*Chair of the Advisory Board
International Engineering Program*

Interview with Dr. Heidi Kirk Duffy

Dr. Duffy, you played an instrumental role in helping the IEP's founder, Dr. John Grandin, get the program off the ground 25 years ago. You provided valuable connections to German industry and foundations, and you have supported the IEP most generously from the very first beginnings to the present day. How did you get involved with the IEP?

My longstanding relationship with the IEP began by getting to know John Grandin who has left a lasting legacy to the University of Rhode Island, its International Engineering Program, and the concept of global engineering education around the United States. Our relationship actually began through my late husband, Chet, whose name now graces the Chester Kirk Engineering building at URI. The first in his family to go to college, Chet was forever grateful to the University where he received a degree in Chemical Engineering.

Chet went on to found a very successful company AMTROL, which had a subsidiary in Germany. Thus he was more than interested when he learned of the IEP concept from the Engineering Dean Hermann Viets who developed the idea with his next-door neighbor, Professor John Grandin, the language & literature teacher who spoke fluent German. Chet and I, a native of Germany, were excited when the IEP was actually started in 1987. We were blessed with many good friends with established contacts in Germany and decided to help John involve some of them with the new-founded IEP.

One distinguished couple, in the Düsseldorf area, was particularly interested. Hannes Winkhaus was a lead partner in one of Germany's largest law firms and happened to be a director on AMTROL's board. His wife, Ilse, a prominent gynecologist, was all in with the idea as she was once an exchange student in the United States from her native Switzerland. One of her friends was Hubertus Christ, an executive with ZF, a world leader in driveline and chassis technology, and thus began an extraordinary relationship with the IEP to this day. Hannes and Ilse introduced the program to another friend, the owner of Vorwerk, the vacuum cleaner giant, and to the Van Meeteren Foundation, which still supports the IEP with funding towards the annual German Study Tour. Naturally, John Grandin was closely involved and soon the program was introduced to other firms such as Siemens, BMW, Hilti, and many others.

How did you meet John Grandin, and what impressed you about him?

I first met John through Dean Viets, who has since left to lead the Milwaukee School of Engineering, and our long working relationship immediately took hold. Fortunate for me, he and his wife Carol also became lasting friends that I sincerely cherish.

To this day, I vividly remember the day I first walked into his incredibly small office. At that time, John was running the entire program by himself. He taught German to the students, found them jobs, filled out the paperwork for their internships, and helped them get placed with host families in Germany. He escorted the kids overseas for their study tours, and counseled them throughout their IEP journey.

While the students were away from the Kingston campus, each had to write John a monthly letter in German about their experience. An amazingly energetic person, he also visited the involved firms during the summer months for an on-site report on the students to help determine if the kids were meeting the expectations of the various companies. While in Germany, he would recruit new firms to the IEP cause.

While doing all of this, he started the *German Summer School* at URI; and also founded the *Annual Colloquium on International Engineering Education*, which now attracts colleges and universities from over the U.S. and the world. John's IEP model is now a reality for many of these institutions.

Believe it or not, John was just getting started. He always nurtured a dream for the German IEP to have its own facility on campus. A rundown fraternity house was a possibility and he raised the funds to buy it. Unfortunately, the students had left it as a virtual pigsty, and John even had to work as a laborer on its rehabilitation. The IEP students loved living in the "new" building where they dined in their own facility, watched German television, and honed their language skills together.

The IEP Advisory board plays an essential role in guiding the IEP, and in providing a network of support. When did John and you set up the board?

John believed early on that he needed an Advisory Board to help him carry out the IEP mission, and created it in the late 1980s. I was invited to be Chair in 1993 as my family had already been deeply involved since the very beginnings of the program. Two years later, John established an exchange relationship with the Technische Universität Braunschweig, one of Germany's top nine technical schools which added yet another dimension to the IEP. Early Board members, who helped with the growing program and are still involved today, are Frank Curtin, Jim Feeney, Udo Schroff, Bill Silvia, and several German Consul Generals for New England.

One Consul in particular, Rolf-Dieter Schnelle, was very involved. In 2005, we had our annual Board meeting in Berlin, where Rolf arranged a State Luncheon

honoring the program at the Foreign Ministry, and the government presented a check of \$250,000 for the program. An incredible gesture that recognized the value of our global engineering program!

The Heidi Kirk Duffy Living & Learning Community provides housing for 76 international engineering students who can live in the older IEP house or the newer Texas Instrument house. A vital part of the success story of the IEP, it is a source of pride to the students and faculty in the program, and it gives IEP students a sense of community, and an opportunity to practice their language skills with exchange students from our partner universities abroad. It also offers arguably the best food on campus! What was your role in building this unique Living & Learning center?

While the visionary Professor John Grandin thus began to build the international reputation of the IEP abroad, back on campus, he had his eyes on another aging fraternity house right next door to the IEP House. A one-time opportunity arose to buy the building. At the time, I owned a yacht "Liberty" which I decided to donate to the URI Foundation with the guarantee that the proceeds be used by the IEP to buy a second building. The stars aligned and the deal got done. John also worked his magic and received a grant from the Max Kade Foundation to start the Max Kade floor in the new facility. It was a great honor for me that in September 2007, both houses together were named the *Heidi Kirk Duffy Center for International Engineering Education*.

Through your effective leadership and networking for the IEP, through your most generous donations towards Center, to the John Grandin IEP Directorship Fund, your ongoing annual contributions to the program, and even your provision to secure the program's future by way of deferred giving, you have surpassed any other private donor in your enthusiasm for the IEP. What has kept you engaged over a quarter of a century?

My enthusiasm for the IEP is naturally a reflection of John Grandin's enthusiastic leadership. More important than the buildings, of course, are the IEP students. John believes in them so much that they easily bought into what they are achieving and began to build great careers. At his 70th birthday celebration, six of the IEP alums were present to share their amazing stories of success. It brought him to tears.

What a legacy! More than twenty-five year later, the IEP has grown to include four language programs (German, French, Spanish, and Chinese), tons of involved companies worldwide, has garnered numerous awards, and achieved international fame.

And it's all because of John. His leadership, his vision, and his never-give-up attitude have built a real jewel for URI and its students. What a life's achievement. He will never be forgotten.

Heidi Kirk Duffy