

Saga of a Trailblazer: Katharine G. Butler 1925-2019

Some people *do* things that set new standards of excellence, and some people *are* things in the lives of other people. Dr. Katharine “Kay” G. Butler, both *did* and *was*. This is the brief story of Kay Butler’s long and impressive life, with comments by some of the many people who knew how special she was.

What Kay Did

Kay excelled at school. At a time when people questioned whether college was a waste of time for women, Kay earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Speech Pathology and Audiology at Western Michigan University, writing her master’s thesis (in 1952) on “Parental Comprehension of the Adolescent Stutterer’s Attitude Toward His Stuttering,” and later earning an Education Specialist’s degree in Psychology, also at WMU. Jan Bedrosian remembered Kay telling a story at a memorial service for Charles Van Riper in 1999-- “She was the only female graduate student in the department while he was Chair. She noticed that he always invited the male students to his cabin in the Upper Peninsula, and she was not very happy about this. So, she decided to stop wearing dresses and start wearing pants! My guess is that she was a trailblazer her entire life.”

Trailblazer indeed; Kay was never one to falter when facing inevitable setbacks. Ellen Ratner wrote that, “She used her talents like a torch, shining a bright light far down the road of the speech-language pathology field. She endured professional and personal setbacks with courage and the will to move forward.” The lesson of persistence in the face of adversity is one that is best taught by those who have lived it.

Kay earned her Ph.D. in Hearing and Speech Science at Michigan State University in 1967. Kay's academic excellence and thirst for learning did not end there, as she always demonstrated a strong desire to expand her breadth of knowledge of scientific literature across disciplines. I imagine that this is part of what led her to conceptualize and in 1980 bring to the profession the journal you are reading, *Topics in Language Disorders*. It was Kay's vision that led to TLD becoming a widely read, peer-reviewed research-to-practice journal that continues to draw both interdisciplinary and international issue editors, contributors, and readers. As Anne van Kleeck wrote, "Kay was such a key player in putting child language, and then child language and literacy, solidly on the research and clinical map. Indeed, many of us can remember when it was deeply questioned whether or not child language, and then (years later) literacy, were appropriately in the scope of speech-language pathology practice. We owe much to Kay that both are now very much taken for granted as being an integral part of what we do."

Kay had a way with words. Elaine Silliman wrote that Kay "was the consummate wordsmith. Regardless of the genre or the purpose, Kay could generate the perfect confection of linguistic choices to make us wonder how she managed to write as gracefully as she did. Of course, her writing was not effortless, but that was Kay." Elaine wrote further about the impact of Kay's writings and publications on people beyond the profession of speech-language pathology. "She was the unassuming, natural person who would seldom take credit for the multiple ways her outstanding communication abilities influenced others inside and outside of the discipline. I always marveled at how major figures in other disciplines who had barely heard of our language work recognized the name, Katharine Butler. Her wordsmithing was trailblazing because it opened doors to interdisciplinary collaboration."

Kay not only wrote well, as Ellen Ratner observed, “she was able to converse about a wide range of subjects.” As demonstration of her exceptional ability to connect diverse ideas, Judy Duchan shared a piece written by Kay about a long-ago conversation that Kay reported having with Charles Van Riper. It is remarkable how this conversation presaged the overwhelming scientific evidence of the importance of phonological processing to the acquisition of skills for reading decoding—and vice versa. It also showed Kay’s deep sensitivity to literacy and other practical concerns, as well as her sense of humor. In Kay’s words:

Walking with Dr. Van Riper on the campus of WMU near the School of Education's kindergarten room, where my daughter and his son were both enrolled at the age of 5 during summer school session, while puffing on his pipe, he opined "now that we're going to whole-word reading, we'll see lots more children with articulation problems in the schools." He was right, of course. I graduated two years later, and such children were already inhabiting classrooms in the two school districts I served, all 250 children on the case load in 17 schools. My crowning achievement was learning to back my car out of snow banks during Michigan winters. My sorrow was hearing that clinicians in NYC schools had caseloads of 400 to 500.

Another thing Kay did well was serve in leadership roles in both state and national associations. Kay led many efforts to improve service delivery and promote policies that would address such issues as unmanageable caseloads. She served as American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) President for not just one term (in 1978), but two (also in 1996). In between these two terms (from 1983-1986 and 1987-1990), she provided leadership internationally, serving two terms as President of the International Association of Logopedics and Phoniatrics. This was in addition to terms as state association president for both New York and California. Kathy Coufal remembers her first meeting with Kay, a time when Kathy was “tasked with creating the first committee on state and national association relations. As part of

my role with the Council of State Association Presidents, I had to contact Dr. Butler, then President of ASHA. She was an icon—someone I could not imagine ‘just calling on the phone,’ because I was a doctoral student. To my relief, she agreed to meet, and as I joined her for breakfast at the ASHA convention to discuss ideas, the first thing she said when I introduced myself and greeted her as Dr. Butler was, ‘My friends call me Kay. Please call me Kay.’” Kathy also remembered a piece of advice that might surprise many women today. In Kay’s words, it was to, “always say YES, try not to say NO. You just never know where those new opportunities may take you.” Kay greeted so many opportunities with enthusiasm. As Kathy summarized, “In many ways that sums up what Kay modeled for all of us—say yes, be open, take action.”

Anthony Bashir also wrote about Kay’s actions as a leader, emphasizing her ability to lead in a manner that could bridge divides. He wrote: “I first came to know and respect Kay when she served as President of ASHA and conducted her first Legislative Council. Dorothy Dwyer and I were the floor managers and, as you might suspect, there were many understandings on the conduct of business that needed to be worked through. Kay was insightful, fair, and directed it all with a firm hand.” Anthony also wrote about Kay’s manner of leading and drawing people and groups together at a time when he “represented the then Orton Society [now the International Dyslexia Association] on the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, and Kay represented ASHA, with Stan Dublinski. She and I came together to resolve real differences between the professional groups. Again, she was thoughtful, careful, and diplomatic in developing the strategies that she and I and Dr. Sylvia Richardson would undertake to ‘resolve the rifts’.”

As Sister Marie De Montfort of Ireland observed, Kay had a particular skill at giving “great encouragement.” Not only that, Kay actively sought opportunities to mentor and support

those earlier in their careers. Every time I ‘pay it forward’ by writing a letter of recommendation, reviewing a tenure file, or providing comments on a manuscript, I think of how often Kay did this for me. I was not the only one. Deena Bernstein wrote that Kay “honored me by writing a letter supporting my tenure, and she honored me by first asking me to write an article for TLD and then asking me to serve on its Editorial Board. Kathleen Whitmire wrote, “I recall how awed, humbled, and capable I felt when Kay hired me as a clinic supervisor at Syracuse University ... and asked me to write a book review for TLD ... and asked me to serve on the Editorial Board ... and to write an article ... and to edit an issue ... and to have dinner with her at the ASHA Convention many years. She had a way of making me feel important and competent – as she did for ALL of us! Her interest in connecting with others and supporting others in an authentic giving way was so rare.”

In honoring Kay’s influence and encouragement, Barbara Ehren wrote to her own doctoral students about how Kay “took note of young female academics and nurtured their development in her many leadership roles, including two presidencies of ASHA.” Kay did this in many ways. Barbara wrote, “I will never forget early in my career getting ready to do a solo presentation at an ASHA convention, looking out at the sea of people and seeing in the front of the room Kay Butler. I was exhilarated with the honor of her presence and terrified at the same time. Her compliments at the end of the presentation meant the world to me and cemented my trajectory.”

Kay mentored with intentionality. Gail Venable noted that Kay “brought out the best in others.” Gail added, “I was certainly the beneficiary of her confidence and encouragement when she asked me to edit an issue of TLD and gave me the freedom to shape it as I saw fit. I think when Kay believed in you, you couldn't do otherwise but rise to the occasion.” Elaine Silliman

also observed Kay's generosity as a mentor, writing, "Over the decades, the number of individuals who benefited from her unselfish support is legend. In a real way, she was a shepherd who had a knack for continuously identifying those with the potential for expanding the quality of the profession and bringing them into a suitable network that could support the development of their abilities." Kathy Coufal further described Kay's mentoring, noting that "she listened, trusted, prompted, invited, set a model, and encouraged me to do the same. She led but never demanded you follow HER path—just that she had vision and action and encouraged others to cultivate their own vision and follow it."

Who Kay Was

Kay filled many roles across her lifetime. She was first a daughter, born March 15, 1925 to Talbot John Howell Gorrell and Katharine Parmenter Gorrell in Chicago Heights, Illinois. She became a bride in 1943, when she married Joseph Franklin Butler (her beloved Joe, who served as a pilot in World War II), and she remained Joe's wife and admirer for all the long years of their marriage (Joe preceded Kay in death, as did their daughter, Kathy). In their early marriage, Joe and Kay settled in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where Kay became a mother to their children, Kathy, Andy, and Paul. Motherhood was a role she loved. Later, Kay became a grandmother (and great grandmother), also a treasured role. As Kay's family described her, "Kay was a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother. She enjoyed cooking gourmet meals and was the organizing force behind many memorable family vacations and trips abroad."

Kay was a friend. One of Kay's closest friends, Ellen Ratner, walked faithfully alongside Kay's family on her final long journey through dementia. Ellen described Kay as a woman who "lived a life of substance, meaning, and generosity." Ellen added that, "For me, Kay was a woman of valor; a woman who was strong in all things that mattered—she was strong of will,

strong in character, strong in her values, strong in her knowledge and love for the speech and language field, and a feminist before her time. She was smart, curious, and purposeful. She was a passionate advocate for ASHA. Kay was honest, ethical, and highly principled, a life-long learner and an enthusiastic reader.”

Elaine Silliman also wrote about what it was like to be Kay’s friend. She described Kay as “a friend who you could call at all hours of the day and night to discuss everything and nothing. Her graciousness extended to invitations for a visit if you were nearby in California...and, if you were lucky, for dinner and a stay-over...at the beautiful Monterey home she shared with her loving spouse, Joe Butler. Kay was a gourmet not only in the selection of restaurants where you dined with her but also in her own cooking. A meal with Kay and Joe in their home was a meal to remember.”

Kay’s love for cooking was a joy to many. Michael Kimbarow wrote, “I was fortunate to share an office with Kay the first few years I was at San Jose State University. In addition to nurturing my soul and mind, she also nurtured the body and brought food to share.” Michael also described how he “always enjoyed talking with Kay while looking at my CCC on the wall with her 1978 Presidential signature on it! Made me appreciate the arc of my career and I never lost the awe I felt in the presence of her humble greatness.”

Kay’s friendship, and her professionalism, were unique in many ways. Barbara Shadden wrote, “I remember the first time Kay and I really talked—about our profession and the journal, but also about life in general and our lives in particular. I was so "new" and so amazed that this Kay Butler who was so well known and respected actually had time for me and had real life challenges. But that is the point. She was so genuine. I hope I learned from that—that it is ok to be who you are, no matter what the setting or interaction or your professional role.”

Kay was a natural and nurturing leader. Tony Bashir described her as “a bright leader at so many levels and a person of humility and deep caring for the nurturing and transforming of so many of us.” But it is not easy to capture the essence of Kay. Geraldine Wallach described her as “nurturer-in-chief,” but Kay was no coddler. As Ellen Ratner noted, “Kay admired women who were strong, competent, and accomplished in their chosen field. She disliked people who were pretenders to the throne of knowledge or who were biased because of race, gender, national origin, or religion.” Kay did not coddle newcomers, nor suffer bigots; rather, she sought to empower those she saw as worthy leaders. Gerry Wallach wrote further that Kay “provided the push we needed to leave her protective professional, as well as personal, nest. Following Kay’s unique and forward-looking style, she taught us to break traditions that needed to be broken, for example, to fight the good fight in language-learning disabilities and the expanding role of speech-language pathologists in literacy. Kay took on many issues before they became issues.” Patty Prelock, who later followed Kay’s footsteps in the role of ASHA President, wrote, “Kay had a generosity of spirit and intellect, paved the way for those who followed her, and gave us the confidence and charge to do better and be better.”

As Kathy Coufal wrote, Kay was a “true icon” (although this was a characterization Kay likely would eschew). Kathy explained further that Kay was “key to so many innovations and a mentor, friend, advocate for many of us. Personally, she was like a guardian angel/fairy godmother to me. She nudged and led me into so many ventures.” Deena Bernstein added that Kay was a “teacher, mentor, a visionary, and a wise woman who was also my friend.” Bonnie Singer described her as a “beacon for language and literacy and such an inspiration.” Although Kay would have grown impatient with too many words of admiration, they are as genuine as she was. Yvette Hyter summarized Kay as “a gift to us and our profession.” Gary Troia, along with

Sarah Wallace, took over the editorial reigns of TLD after my editorial stint (from 2006-2018). He wrote, “I met Kay once at ASHA convention many years ago when I was new to the field, and knew immediately I was in the presence of someone with an indomitable spirit and keen intellect, and, of course, I was in complete awe of her.” Carol Westby wrote, “I can't imagine what my life would have been like without the love and mentoring Kay has provided me over the years.”

In her professional life, Kay was a clinician, a supervisor, a professor, a program chair, a dean, an author, and, always a scholar. Her clinical career began as clinician for the Portage and Vicksburg, Michigan public schools from 1950-1952, followed by a position as supervisor in the Kalamazoo Public Schools. Kay then balanced roles as mother and graduate student, taking a position as Assistant Professor of Psychology at WMU in 1961. Her years in formal teaching and administrative positions led her to San Jose State University, then across country to Syracuse University in New York, and then back again to California. In her writings about this balancing process, Kay remembered Charles Van Riper's advice when he was “asked how he could find the time to write his books, with a heavy teaching and clinical schedule.” Kay wrote, “He indicated that one needed to sit down and write each day before retiring for the night, and that the first sentence was the most difficult.”

Kay was a scholar, but she was not arrogant about it. As Ellen Ratner wrote, “She never considered herself the smartest person in the room and she learned from everyone. Kay told me how her husband, Joe, was always the smartest one around.” I know from Kay's and my conversations about the editing process that Kay was sensitive to the feelings of authors. In one conversation, she allowed that it might be acceptable to soften especially harsh comments of reviewers before sending them back to authors.

Kay's vision and scholarship played out in many ways as Editor of this journal. She almost always began her "From the Editor" column with a perfect quotation from literature or other diverse sources, which set a high bar for those of us who followed. Judy Duchan and Elaine Silliman pointed to one of these quotations in their 2002 tribute to Kay for the inaugural Butler symposium. It was drawn from a letter written by the King of Samoa in 1895 to his chiefs on the opening of the Road of Gratitude, and read as follows:

When a road is once built, it is a strange thing how it collects traffic,
How every year as it goes on, more and more people are found to walk thereon,
And others are raised up to repair and perpetuate it and keep it alive.

Kay blazed a trail and built a road, which many have traveled since, and many travel now. Because of her strong stewardship, the rest of us find it easier to maintain the pathway and extend its reach. Because of her dementia, Kay was robbed of the ability to say goodbye to all of us (I think she would have avoided goodbyes, regardless), but these words of goodbye that Charles "Cully" Van Riper originally wrote to Kay are exactly what I think many of us would say now to her. "I thank you for the good company of ordinary times and for the ease you brought me in times of trial. Good connections. Goodbye."

Nickola Wolf Nelson, Ph.D.

Editor Emerita

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