

The Sisterhood of SWE

By Janet L. Williams, P.E.,
SWE Editorial Board Chair

After attending the SWE 2000 conference in Washington, D.C., and before being consumed by the whirlwind of activity at the office, I took a few moments to reflect on my conference experience. It occurred to me that the energy and enthusiasm I share with my SWE friends results in personal renewal and revitalization. I love the sensation of genuine, unabashed joy in greeting colleagues I haven't seen since the last conference. We chat about family and work, getting caught up on the latest crisis or accomplishment. We laugh and empathize as we share the 15-minute version of what has transpired over the last year.

It is during these moments that I am most in tune with the sisterhood of SWE, and truly appreciate what the organization brings to my life. It is an extraordinary network of extraordinary women, in which one can't help but feel awed. But there is also a sense of comfort, like flopping down in a favorite old easy chair and being completely relaxed. We can be ourselves, because SWE is a safe, supportive environment for sharing and learning about our careers, ourselves, and each other.

This comfortable sense of sisterhood reminds me of my regular visits to an indoor pool this past winter. I observed a closely-knit group of "regulars" who clearly knew each other by name, occupation, grandchildren, and other touchstone pieces of information. They spanned age groups from teens to seniors, and represented multiple ethnic backgrounds. Some were triathletes in training; others were dealing with disabilities and the normal effects of aging. But for all their diversity, the sense of sisterhood in this group was unmistakable. They brought cookies and cards for each other. They inquired about the latest illness or addition to the family, which sometimes resulted in the display of photographs produced magically out of a gym bag full of wet gear. When a member of the group did not appear at her usual time, these

women would query each other to find out the reason for the absence. It is interesting that all of this interaction occurred while the women engaged in various stages of showering, dressing, coifing, applying makeup, universal activities that tended to put them on equal terms. I don't think these women saw each other much outside of the swimming pool locker room, but they displayed a deep sense of caring for each other. The one common denominator of physical fitness drew this diverse group of women together into a strong mutual support group.

This is the kind of camaraderie I have come to rely on within SWE. We are as diverse a group as ever came together at a conference — but we are united by our comparable education and profession, as well as our tenacity and personal fortitude. Those commonalities are enough to create and foster the sisterhood through which we support one another. Some of my

dearest colleagues are those I have met at SWE conventions and conferences, and may only see once or twice a year. Despite the limited contact, these are friends I trust and can rely on for support. I can travel to just about any major city in the U.S., and the SWE friends I have made through the years would offer a friendly visit and a place to stay. And I feel the same warmth and friendship toward them.

Do you need a reason to consider attending the next conference in your region, or next year's annual conference in Denver? Consider the support you could get from the sisterhood of SWE as you read through the awards presentations, the special events, the networking, and other highlights of the 2000 conference.

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