

# A Hearing-Impaired Kappa Paves the Way in Corporate America

—By ANN GRAHAM SCHNAEDTER, *Missouri*

Today's college graduates have a wide array of female role models, many of whom have made strides in what just a few decades ago were considered male bastions. For LINDA BEERBOWER BURKE, *William and Mary*, the challenges she faced climbing corporate ladders during the 70s paled compared to the challenge of being hearing impaired.

Linda had done well in high school, but in college she struggled to hear professors and relied on friends' lecture notes to be sure she had not missed anything. She says when she was 4 years old, her mother was amused that she had a preschool friend whom she called "Bed." His name was Ned. No one suspected these gaffes were linked to her hearing until she was tested at school, but even then she passed the "whisper test," and her parents were told that she just wasn't listening. This pattern continued through high school.

Before going off to college, Linda's hearing was tested at West Virginia University's medical center, and she was diagnosed with sensorineural hearing loss in both ears. She says she was a unique case, as she lost low-frequency tones and retained high-frequency tones (thus passing the whisper test.) She could hear vowel sounds and some consonants in human speech. At that time, though, her doctor suggested that she was doing well and did not recommend hearing aids since she was adjusting to a new environment in college. She now thinks that was the wrong advice.

She says, "Socially, I don't remember problems, except trying to identify who was asking me out on dates on the telephone." She says people tend to swallow their names when they identify themselves on the phone. "One time, in the Kappa house, I accepted a date from someone who knew me well and was in a fraternity with which I was familiar, but I was not sure who would arrive to pick me up. Two of my sisters went down to the living room to identify my date before I came down. It turned out to be someone I knew and liked a lot."

Despite her limitations, Linda was able to maintain a B average. But when she was fitted with her first hearing aid during her senior year, "It was phenomenal. I remember shrinking back in the doorway as I left the clinic, amazed at the loud sounds of passing traffic." She says her grades improved dramatically that semester.

Linda went on to attend the University of Pittsburgh's law school, graduating in 1973. That same year she landed her first job at Alcoa in Pittsburgh, as one of the first women in its legal department. At age 25, she consulted a nationally known ear specialist who informed her that by age 50 she would be completely deaf. The deterioration of her hearing continued gradually until she reached her late 40s. She says while she was careful to inform people that she was hard of hearing, she found many were not patient enough to deal with repeating things and speaking clearly. She became proficient at lip reading, as well as diffusing frustration with humor.

Linda spent 27 years at Alcoa during a time when few women were entering corporate America; eight of those years were spent as head of Alcoa's worldwide tax function. The challenges were immense, as the company was growing rapidly and expanding globally. As she became a top executive, the competitive landscape got rougher. "Being a mother was a bigger issue than merely being a woman," she says. "I had lots of help. My husband was a hands-on dad who cooked dinner every night. I had good household help and carved out enough flexibility to attend my children's events."

Linda firmly believes that today's professional women should take advantage of modern advances, such as flex- and part-time work and on-site daycare. She says women of her generation worked hard to ensure that use of such accommodations does not derail careers. "I am proud of that," she says.

After retiring from Alcoa, she spent three years at the IRS. She says it was a good time to work for the IRS. "Change was demanded and expected, so

that many barriers were down. I also assumed a new job with few boundaries, so that I was able to shape the job around things I liked best and at which I was experienced and capable.”

All this made it possible for Linda’s next leap, teaching third-year law students at Pittsburgh and doing part-time tax consulting. She says that teaching corporate tax law has been the most challenging, trying to keep it engaging and meaningful.

During her tenure at the IRS, Linda lost almost all hearing very quickly. After she left, she learned that she qualified for a cochlear implant. The technology uses electronic signals to replace the damaged hair cells of the inner ear that no longer function to transmit signals to the auditory nerve. The surgery was not easy, and the healing took about six weeks. But she says the system is a miracle. Her comprehension of one-syllable words (for which there is no context) improved from 10 percent with hearing aids, to more than 80 percent. She says she still has a hard time hearing in noisy environments, but her life has been transformed. “I can actually hear people without looking at them.”

Of her days at William and Mary, Linda says the Greek system was excellent. Her mother had been a Kappa at the University of Pittsburgh, so she was familiar with the sorority system. “Kappa gave me a first-rate group of girlfriends, many of whom are still good friends today, especially my former roommates, **BETSY EWING TEBOW** and **DALE BRUBECK** (former Executive Director of the Kappa Kappa Gamma Fraternity and Foundation).”

Linda feels her Kappa relationships made her value interaction with other women in achieving goals. She is active with the YWCA and the FISA Foundation (which focuses on the needs of women) as well as the **PITTSBURGH ALUMNAE ASSOCIATION** in activities advancing Reading Is Fundamental in a public school.

In 2008, William and Mary honored Linda as a Medallion Recipient. She has served as a member of the Alumni Board of Directors, and has recently endowed diversity programming. She thinks the lack of diversity in the late 60s inspired her passion for supporting racial and cultural diversity as a human and business necessity. Linda is passionate about embracing diversity as our country continues its multiracial, multicultural and multiethnic heritage in our global society.



**LINDA BEERBOWER BURKE, William and Mary**

Photo by Mark Portland

