

## **Early History of SWE in Florida**

*by Judy Kersey, charter President of the Florida Section*

I remember the first day that I found out about the Society of Women Engineers (SWE). As a graduate student at the University of Florida in Gainesville, I received a letter from the Dean of the College of Engineering inviting me to an organizational meeting of the Society of Women Engineers. This was on February 5, 1974. Wilma Smith was on the faculty at the University of South Florida and was organizing a student section there and had contacted the University of Florida about re-activating the student section in Gainesville. Three women engineering students showed up for the meeting, so we were elected officers by default for the remainder of that year. I was selected as President. This was the start of a long association with SWE for me.

The re-activated University of Florida Student Section started out small, but eager. There were 76 women engineering students in Gainesville at that time. We set about (with the help of the Dean's Office) to entice them into activities and meetings. By the end of that spring semester, we had a fairly active group and convinced the Benton Engineering Council to give us money to help pay the way to SWE National Convention and Student Conference in Dallas. Judy Sullivan and I were joined by Karen Lamb from USF and drove to Dallas!

I can still recall LeEarl Bryant (current IEEE USA President) welcoming us to the Student Conference, getting us involved in networking activities so we met students from other sections and exchanged ideas. In those days, we students didn't stay in hotels. We were housed in a university dorm and the student conference was held on campus. Later in the week, we joined the members at the National Convention. We spent many hours in the SWE hospitality suite that has now become the "Over the Hill" suite, meeting members and learning more about what SWE was doing nationally. Karen, Judy and I all became energized from that experience and during that long drive home, started crafting plans to hold a state-wide conference in Florida.

By the time we got home to Florida, we had filled numerous pages with notes and plans. Being young, naïve, and impatient, we decided to have our own conference that November. This was to become the First Annual Florida State Symposium for Women in Engineering and Science. Since I was returning back to work at the Kennedy Space Center at the end of the summer term, we decided to have the conference in Cocoa Beach. We divided all the responsibilities with me in charge of local arrangements, company contacts and finances. I was in charge of finances since I was the only one with enough money to keep this project afloat until we started getting contributions.

We spent a hectic four months planning and pulling off this conference, starting with no funding and no company sponsors. We solicited sponsors from companies both in Florida and from companies we had met at the National Convention. To get a good income stream, we offered advertisements in our program book and career fair booths and offered a resume book. To keep the costs down, most of the activities were held at Cocoa Beach High School.



Judy Kersey (standing), introducing Sigrid King (now Messemer) as the keynote speaker at the First Annual Florida State Symposium for Women in Engineering and the Sciences.

This symposium was an outstanding success. We had great company support, all eager to recruit women engineers. We had a wide variety of speakers, primarily provided by the company sponsors. But, best of all, we found lots of women engineers from around the state, some of whom became good friends and hard working SWE members. As the concluding event at the conference, we held a meeting to decide where the next symposium would be held, who would chair the event and found we had a much larger base of support than just the two student sections we had started with. This was also the start of SWE activities at a number of schools. We had committee members (not all students) at USF, UF, University of Miami, Florida Institute of Technology, Florida Technological University (later to become University of Central Florida) and Florida Atlantic University. We held planning and coordination meetings around the state every two to three months. This led to a cohesive feeling among all the women engineering students around the state. The Florida State Symposium continued for many years, until the eventual breakup of the Florida Section when all the other sections in Florida were gradually formed. A list of Florida State Symposiums is included in appendix A with a list of locations and Chairs.

It was primarily through the work involved in orchestrating a statewide meeting annually that drew enough women engineers in the state to join SWE to allow us to consider requesting a section be chartered in the state of Florida in 1978. We had our charter signing meeting in Cocoa Beach at the old Ramon's Restaurant (now torn down and replaced with a strip mall). We combined one of our symposium planning meetings with a Saturday luncheon with JoAnn Morgan, NASA Kennedy Space Center as speaker. At the conclusion of the meeting, we had enough members to sign the charter petition and elected officers. Once again I got elected President. Our charter was officially approved by SWE on June 21, 1978. We chose to postpone our charter presentation until the next Symposium that was to be held in Gainesville when we would have the most members present. We added an extra event that year, a Champagne Breakfast meeting. This was to become an annual event and one of our general membership meetings. The charter was presented to the section by SWE President Paula Loring. Well attended, the keynote speaker for the banquet was Judy Resnick -- a night which those of us who were there will never forget.



Judy Kersey, first Florida Section President receiving the charter from SWE National President, Paula Loring in November, 1976



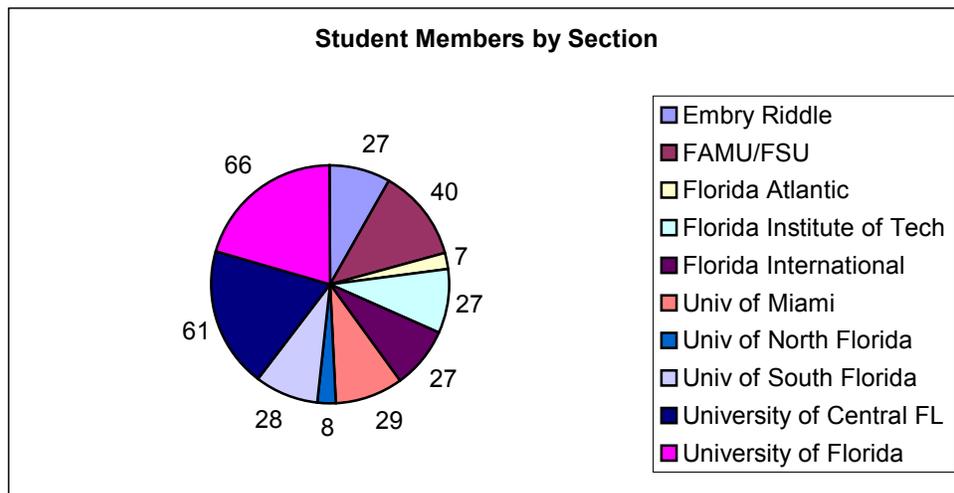
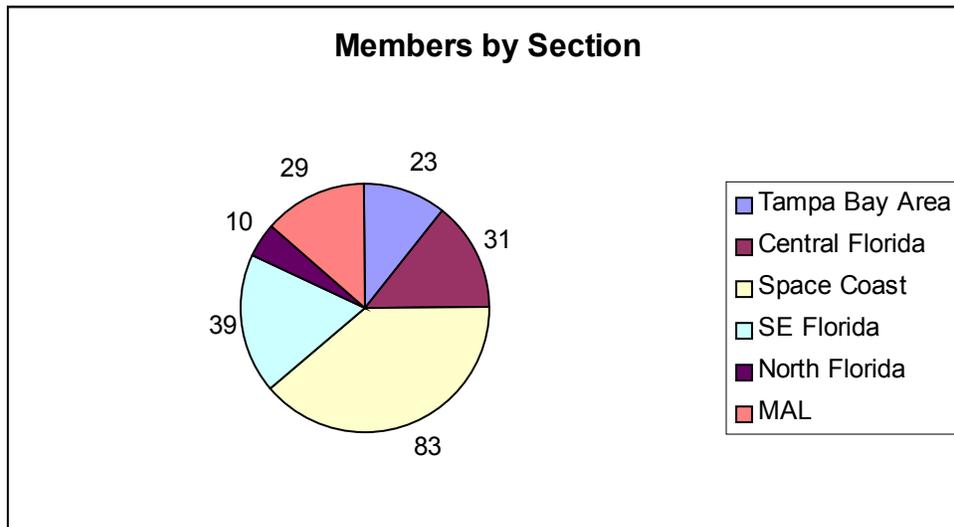
The new Florida Section Officers:  
From left to right standing, Barbara Pemberton, Secretary; Judy Kersey, President; Paula Loring, SWE National President; Pat Hart, Vice President; and seated, Wilma Smith, Treasurer.

The Florida Section continued hosting annual symposiums in conjunction with the growing number of student sections in the state for several year, rotating locations and hosts. This was the primary activity of the section. As the number of women engineers and grew and the number of SWE members in Florida increased, small groups began splitting off to form local sections. The first was Tampa Bay Area Section, chartered in June, 1982. Subsequently, the Pinellas County Section split from Tampa Bay Area Section in April 1986. Both of these sections became inactive for a period of years and then a new Tampa Bay Area Section was re-chartered in October 2000 including the Pinellas County area.

The next section the break off was the Central Florida Section that was chartered in June 1988. This section included Orlando and the surrounding areas. The following year, the Space Coast Section was chartered in May 1989 including Brevard, Indian River and Volusia Counties, followed closely by the chartering of the West Palm Beach Section in July of 1989 covering Palm Beach and Martin Counties as well as parts of Broward. This section has subsequently been re-named the Southeast Florida Section and added all of Broward County.

In October of 1992 Florida's First Coast Section was chartered including Jacksonville and surrounding area followed the following year by the chartering of the Miami Section in May of 1993. (The Miami Section was declared inactive in 2002.) With the chartering of these final two sections, the areas remaining in the Florida Section were primarily rural areas with a minimum of engineering companies. As a result, the Florida Section was disbanded in June of 1993 with the remaining twenty members becoming Members At Large of the Society.

The vitality and size of the sections and the activities they conduct has varied over the years depending on the local economy and the leadership of the section. In 1982 when local sections started forming, there were 90 members in the Florida Section. Today there are 215 members in the state including the five sections and the members at large. Student sections have formed at all the major engineering colleges in the state and currently have 320 student members at ten universities. Distribution of members and student members is shown in the two charts below.



Today, SWE is present throughout the state, hosting events to encourage young women to pursue engineering, educating their parents about how to help their daughters and in providing professional development training and opportunities for members and other women engineers. Information on specific sections and activities may be found on the web at <http://www.swe.org/SWE/RegionD/section.html>.

About the author:

Judy Kersey is retired from NASA Kennedy Space Center after 27 years where she was Deputy Director of Electronic Engineering Development. She is a Life Fellow Member of the Society of Women Engineers and is still active both nationally and in the Space Coast Section. She was the SWE Southeast Region Director in 2001-2002 and currently serves as a national committee chair. Judy has a BS in Math from the University of Illinois and a BSEE from the University of Florida.

