In Memoriam: Lynn Preston

With a heavy heart, we share news of the passing of Lynn Preston on October 26, 2020. Lynn was a co-founder of the Engineering Research Centers (ERC) program and served as its chief architect/leader for 25 years; she was also Deputy Division Director of the ENG Division of Engineering Education and Centers for 13 years.

Lynn had many accomplishments during her 42 years at NSF. However, she was best known for the ground-breaking ERC model of academic engineering research and education—one based on strategically planned cross-disciplinary research, strong industrial partnerships, and active involvement of students of all levels in center research—that has strengthened our nation's industrial competitiveness and been influential in transforming academic team research, engineering education, and industrial practices. Following her retirement, Lynn was lead author of a book, "Agents of Change: Engineering Research Centers" (https://erc-history.erc-assoc.org/, released by ASEE) that tells the ERC story.

Lynn earned her B.S. and M.S. degrees in economics from the University of Colorado Boulder. She began her career as an analyst for the Joint US-Thailand Research Organization of the Battelle Memorial Institute and later became an economic analyst for the Institute for Defense Analyses. At NSF, she was one of a team of program managers in the Research Applied to National Needs program, a forerunner of the ERC program. Lynn blazed a trail for women in engineering at NSF, mentoring a generation of program managers and leaders both inside and outside NSF, becoming known for a supportive and collegial style of program management, and implementing rigorous center reporting, review, and renewal procedures.

Lynn's achievements did not go unnoticed. In 1999, the President of the United States recognized her service by conferring on her the rank of Meritorious Executive in the Senior Executive Service. In 2000, NSF bestowed on her its prestigious Distinguished Service Award for her leadership of the ERC program and its role as a model program for industry/university collaboration in NSF and around the world. In 2003, she was honored by the National Society of Professional Engineers as NSF's Engineer of the Year for her contributions to engineering research and education. In 2006, she was elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Medical and Biological Engineering for her leadership in developing and sustaining NSF support for the field of bioengineering. And in 2014, she received the D.I.C. Wang Award for Excellence in Biochemical Engineering, presented jointly by the Society for Biological Engineering, the American Institute for Chemical Engineering, and the American Chemical Society.

But awards are only an outward reflection of human qualities of exceptional commitment, leadership, character, and integrity. Lynn was a creative and inspiring leader and a dedicated public servant, a valued colleague, mentor and friend to many. Her achievements comprise a legacy that will long endure. She is survived by her husband, Dr. Didace Kabatsi, and her son Christopher and daughter-in-law Claire. A memorial video will be compiled in the coming weeks and published in a location that will be made available at that time.