



Mechanical Engineering
Academy of Distinguished Alumni

Mary Jo (Ross) Knobelsdorf

Mechanical Engineering Hall of Fame, 2004

BSME, The University of Texas at Austin, 1952

Dean of Admissions and Records
University of Houston

Mary Jo (Ross) Knobelsdorf graduated from high school in Crockett, Texas in June 1948, before enrolling at The University of Texas. She graduated from UT in August 1952 with a BSME and went to work in Houston in the metallurgy department at Cameron Iron Works, in charge of the Spectrometer Laboratory. Her primary responsibility was to provide rapid analysis of the steel alloys while in the molten state and alloys were being added to the melt.

During World War II, women were first actively recruited for engineering. Mary Jo was the first female student to earn a BSME at UT. The second was her sister, Bertha (Ross) Powledge in 1953. During the Professional Orientation course her first semester, a lecturer said, "Count yourself and the next 9 students in your row. Three will graduate in engineering; seven will either change your major or drop out." She assumed that she would be one of the seven. She was a 16-year-old girl and no girl had earned a BSME. When she passed Dynamics as a sophomore, Dean Woolrich's secretary won a steak dinner from her instructor, who had said a woman could not comprehend acceleration analysis. Her favorite classes were Metallurgy and Machine Design. Though the years, Mary Jo looked back on her days at UT and her fondest memory was that she was succeeding: going from freshman to sophomore to junior to senior

to graduation.

In April 1953, she married an ME classmate, John Knobelsdorf, who worked for the Babcock and Wilcox Company in Houston. B&W moved the Knobelsdorf's to San Antonio in 1957. When their two sons started school, Mary Jo earned a Masters in mathematics from Trinity University, and taught mathematics at San Antonio College. Teaching matched the boys' school hours and summers were free! When B&W moved them back to Houston in 1963, she continued teaching mathematics at South Texas Junior College. She co-authored three Algebra Outline and Exercise Books published by Charles E. Merrill.

When the college got a computer, IBM offered FORTRAN classes to instructors. Learning and teaching FORTRAN was her path to college administration. In the 1970's, she became Dean of Admissions and Records at the junior college, which became Univ. of Houston - Downtown, and then Coordinator of Computer Services at the Houston campus of Texas Women's University. Retiring in the late 1980's, she wrote computer manuals for an Austin software company.

Always an engineer at heart, she learned that the knowledge and confidence gained during those four years at UT made her realize that she could do anything; all she had to do was try.