

Other Than Editing

by Debra E Blakely

Flo Witte: An Editor with a Beat

CSE members generally know Flo Witte as a medical editor. However, she is also an accomplished vocalist who has been performing since she was 8 years old. “I sing to convey a message”, she says, “and knowing that the message has gotten across and that it meant something to someone is a blessing.”

Witte has been a medical editor since 1990, when she was hired by the University of Kentucky as director of the publications office in the department of surgery. Midway through 1997, she took a position as a research coordinator with the Kentucky Spine Institute in Lexington. A year later, she became the director of scientific editing at St Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Then in April 2001, she returned to the University of Kentucky’s College of Medicine.

As the program coordinator for research and leadership development, Witte incorporates a lot of creativity into her job. “I administer a K-30 institutional training grant from the National Institutes of Health, which was established to help educate junior faculty members”, she says. This role involves designing curriculum, editing junior faculty members’ manuscripts, and overseeing a certificate program designed to teach graduate students how to do and write about research, she explains.

Witte began her studies in the sciences and then came full circle, through the arts, before settling back into the sciences and her current position. She says she had a “rude awakening” and recognized that all her talents lay in the humanities while in the midst of a premedicine track. “I always had an interest in medicine because of an aunt who was a nurse anesthetist”, she says. “As a child I used to go with her to the hospital when she was on call, and I’ve always loved the hospital environment—as long as I’m not a patient!”

Witte entered college at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), Hattiesburg, in 1968. “But one semester of college biology and chemistry showed me that my strengths lay in the humanities rather than the sciences”, she recalls. “I turned to music because it is one of my

lifelong loves.

“As a music major, I was required to practice 8 hours per day, and that discipline helps me now—when I’d like to just throw up my hands and say, ‘I give up! This piece is so poorly written that I can’t do anything with it’, I’m reminded to ‘stay the course’ and give it my very best effort.”

About a year into her music degree, with a double major in piano and voice, Witte developed carpal tunnel syndrome from “an overdose of practicing the piano”, had several operations, and eventually had to give up piano. To be a little more practical, she says, she switched to a major in English. “I left music for English. I’ve always loved reading and literature, and I had a fantastic teacher for junior and senior English in high school whose influence led me in that direction”, she says. She completed her bachelor’s degree in English and secondary education with highest honors in 1972 and continued at USM to complete her MA in English in 1973. “When I got my MA in English, I had to take a foreign language, and that awakened my interest in German.”

Witte continued studying and practicing music, however. “I kept taking voice with a great Polish gentleman, Marian Nowakowski, at USM”, Witte explains. “He was a well-known opera singer in Europe before World War II. At the beginning of the war, he served in the Polish army and managed to escape to England. His wife and daughter escaped separately. When his wife was stopped at the border, the Nazi guard found one of Mr Nowakowski’s [phonograph] records in her possession and let her escape and cross the border in return for the record.”

Witte taught German and English at R H Watkins High School in Laurel, Mississippi, for 3 years while pursuing a second master’s degree, in Germanic languages and literatures, at USM and performing at local church functions. In



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1978 she went to Germany with the aid of a Fulbright scholarship to study German at the University of Bonn. When she returned to the United States, she went to the University of Kentucky, Lexington, where she completed a third master's degree, in international business affairs, in 1982. She then worked as an administrative coordinator for marketing at the United States Achievement Academy in Lexington. Her duties included designing and writing marketing materials, editing, and customer relations.

"In 1988 our church choir from Immanuel Baptist Church, Lexington, was invited to sing [Handel's] *Messiah* with several other church choirs in Carnegie Hall for the opening of the Christmas season in New York", Witte recalls. "It was a wonderful experience to be on that stage!"

Witte does not generally publicize her singing talents. "People will hear me sing and ask, 'Hey Flo, will you come and sing?' and it could be for any type of function", she says. Witte sings regularly on request for weddings, funerals, and other events. "It's generally related to church work", she explains. A civic club that began during World War II invited her to put together an anniversary program. She presented an ensemble of songs from the World War II era.

For Witte, the most special aspect of performing is communicating through music. "For me, it's having people come up afterward and tell me how they were moved or stirred by what I've sung." CSE members who attended the 2001 American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) annual conference in Norfolk, Virginia, may recall her singing "The Annual Conference Blues" at a roast for retiring AMWA Executive Director Lillian Sablack. That was not, she says, representative of what she normally sings. When Witte is not performing solos or singing with ensembles, she can be found singing with her church choir.

Currently, between working at her job and performing, Witte is pursuing a doctorate in communication with an emphasis on health communication. "As a science editor I have to be meticulous and careful; I have to know and follow the style guides. As a musician, when I compose a song, direct a singing group, or sing a solo, I'm free to express myself, my emotions, and my beliefs", Witte says. "The editing keeps me grounded, and the music lets me soar!"

DEBRA BLAKELY *wrote this profile during a postdoctoral fellowship with Science Editor.*

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