

# Tribute to Doris M. Curtis, 1991 GSA President

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It is a special privilege and honor for me to lead this tribute to Doris Curtis. While serving with her on the GSA Council and Executive Committee during the past 2 years, I had the pleasure of getting to know Doris, and the opportunity to know and appreciate some of the special personal qualities that made her an effective leader and a lovable human being.

We are pleased that some of her family members could join us this evening for the tribute. Although her sister Janet could not be with us today, Susan and Lucy Suchman, nieces of Doris, are here.

GSA chose Doris Curtis for its president because of her leadership capabilities, her sincere interest in GSA, and her dedication to promoting all facets of geology. She had the nicest way of aiding and encouraging her colleagues to help her make the geological sciences even better.

Many of us also chose Doris as a friend, as her long-time friend Dorothy Echols best said it, because of "her bright, intriguing mind and infectious smile, her positive outlook and 'can do' attitude toward life."

The words that follow come from the thoughts and remembrances of many whose lives Doris touched. Her energy, spirit, and good humor cause us all to smile a little whenever we think of Doris.

First, some words about Doris' public life.

Doris' "can do" attitude brought her the respect—and also the awe—of all who knew her. She found in herself extraordinary leadership skills with which she enhanced many geoscience organizations. She rose to prominent roles in almost every organization she joined. She was not only the president of GSA; Doris had also served as president of the American Geological Institute, the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, and the SEPM Foundation. She was a fellow of GSA and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and she served as chair of the National Academy of Sciences' U.S. National Committee on Geology. Doris was an

honorary member of the Gulf Coast Section of SEPM, the AAPG, the AIPG, the Houston Geological Society, and the 28th International Geological Congress.

In Doris' own words concerning the satisfactions and rewards of participation in professional activities,

I decided early in my career to be a participator. In the early 1940s, I was one of three female geologists in the several-hundred-member Houston Geological Society, and I was proud to be "part of the group." Furthermore, I wanted to know what was going on in the profession, besides what was going on in my own job or my own company.

The rewards to me have been many. One of the exciting rewards has been recognition—appointment to committees, chairmanships, election to office. But the most valuable reward is that of fellowship. The extension of a circle of friends and acquaintances far beyond my own company and my own community gives me a warm and wonderful feeling about our profession.



Doris was born, raised, and educated in New York, graduated from Brooklyn College, and received her doctorate from Columbia University. She was a great pioneer woman in geology, and she never allowed traditional roles to limit her aspirations or stifle her self-expression.

After receiving her doctorate, Doris moved to Houston to seek employment, and after a few years in other jobs, was hired by Shell Oil Company. She left Shell in 1950 to pursue an academic career, but returned to work for Shell from 1959 to 1979. In 1979, Doris and Dorothy Echols, her friend and colleague for more than 50 years, formed a highly successful consulting firm, Curtis and Echols.

Doris participated in two legs of the Deep Sea Drilling Project as a shipboard sedimentologist, an experience she described as being "as fascinating as a trip to the Moon."

Doris' first academic employment was as a member of the faculty of the University of Houston in 1950. In 1954, she joined the faculty of the University of Oklahoma, where she was so popular a teacher that her sedimentary geology courses soon became over-enrolled and had to be restricted. Her infectious enthusiasm and wide-ranging grasp of the earth sciences inspired many of her students to pursue professional careers in geology. Doris especially encouraged young women in the profession, and she had a stimulating influence on people of all ages through her personal and professional support. At the time of her death, Doris was an adjunct professor of geology at Rice University.

Through the years, Doris wrote more than 30 papers in professional journals on paleoecology, biostratigraphy, ostracods, transgressive-regressive sedimentation, deltaic sedimentation, the source and migration of hydrocarbons in the Cenozoic of the Gulf of Mexico, and time-synchronous sandstone deltas in the petroleum-rich Miocene of coastal Louisiana.

Doris was an active member of the League of Women Voters, having served as president of the Oklahoma chapter, and having continued her involvement in Houston. She was a member of the Environmental Quality Committee of the league, in which capacity she presented facts about the petroleum industry's role in conservation and its contributions to pollution control. In 1967, because of her league contributions and her reputation in the petroleum professional community, Doris was selected as one of four United States delegates for an exchange visit to the Soviet Union.

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Doris' interest in women's issues was exemplified by the fact that just 2 months prior to her death, she was a guest speaker on women's issues at Indiana University, in conjunction with Women's History Month. In fact, in that same month, although feeling the effects of her illness, Doris attended and spoke at GSA meetings in Baltimore and San Francisco.

In the early spring, after many tests that she scheduled between her professional travels, Doris was told that she had acute leukemia and needed intensive treatment. She entered M. D. Anderson Cancer Research Institute in Houston in early April. In early May, she participated in the GSA Council meeting by telephone, from her hospital room. Although she was slowly winning her battle with cancer, she suddenly succumbed to pneumonia on May 26.

Now for the more personal side of Doris' remarkable life.

As Doris' niece Susan Suchman commented about Doris' involvement with people, the most important legacy of her Aunt Do is the example of her open heart.

Doris was "Aunt Do-Do" to Dorothy Echols' daughter Jen and son Bill. Bill recalls, "As a child, I thought there were a *lot* of female Ph.D. scientists with open hearts and minds." As he grew up, he realized Aunt Do-Do's "extraordinariness became more apparent each year."

In Jen's words, the "memory of love, understanding, and a cheerful 'you can do it' philosophy radiates." That philosophy is remembered as well by Anny Coury, a friend of Doris' for more than 40 years, who has also commented on Doris' genuine interest in others. Robbie Gries, another long-time friend, remembered rich moments sharing stories with Doris, 25 years her senior, as if they were college coeds.

Some of Doris' personal interests were not obvious to all of us. Only a few knew her to be an extraordinary connoisseur of Kosher dill pickles. Aside from pickles, Doris loved fine food and good company and was a founding member in the 1980s of "The Trenchers"—a group of Americans and Brits who got together at each others' homes to enjoy fine food and discuss international issues.

Her love of and involvement in music was not apparent to all her geology friends. In her younger days, in the 1940s, Doris studied modern dance in Houston.

Doris traveled extensively around the world, often accompanied by Dorothy Echols. She was, in fact, planning for her next holiday with Dorothy after this GSA Annual Meeting. Dorothy recalls the following conversation with Doris in the hospital—her "very last Dodoism"—in Dorothy's words, "I barely mentioned that some friends had just returned from a

month in Costa Rica and loved it—and was about to say, 'how about a trip there?' when she cut in—"I *don't* want to go to Costa Rica." Taken aback, I asked, 'Why?' The answer was 'It's *too* safe.' When asked where we should go that was not too safe, she said, 'Some of the wilds of Mexico—it's not so touristy.'" Dorothy said that many years before, she and Doris had gone on such a trip, which proved to be very exciting—with tales of bandits, smugglers, and the like.

As Doris entered the presidency of GSA one year ago, she said that she was "committed to and excited by the opportunity to help GSA move forward toward achieving continued growth of the geological sciences and fostering the wise use of the Earth and its resources."

It is fitting that the GSA staff chose to honor Doris' memory by planting a Colorado Blue Spruce at headquarters, and that her ashes are interred under it. The roots of the tree go deep into the earth, as did Doris' interests. Its trunk is strong and straight, and down to earth, as was Doris. Its branches spread out in all directions and will continue to grow—as will Doris' influence on all whom she touched. Whether we knew her as Dor, Doris, Aunt Do-Do, or Professor Curtis, we all share a sense of enrichment in having known Doris Curtis.