

Biography of Deborah Jean Wilbur (Kuehn)

November 4, 1954 – February 9, 2002

(As spoken by Dr. David Keeling, Head, Department of Geography and Geology, Western Kentucky University, at her memorial service February 12, 2002, Johnson-Vaughn Funeral Home, Bowling Green, Kentucky.)

The rich, full, and productive life of this wonderful woman cannot be captured by mere words alone, but this biography provides us with a sense of Deborah's life and accomplishments. Debbie was born to Charlie and Beverly Wilbur on November 4, 1954, in Syracuse, New York, and lived most of her growing-up years there. She was the eldest of five children including three sisters: Diane, Doreen, and Denise, and one brother: David.

In high school Deb was very active in sports and other extracurricular activities. She played point guard on the girls' basketball team, which was ranked second in its class in the state of New York. Debbie's personal best in basketball was once sinking a record 56 consecutive free-throws!

After graduating high school in 1972 she entered Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, choosing Geology as her major and graduating with her B.S. degree in 1976. At that time, only about 10 percent of the geology discipline were women.

While studying at Juniata, she met Ken Kuehn, a fellow geology student, and they were married in 1977. On September 19, 1980, Debbie and Ken celebrated the birth of their only child, Kerry Ann Kuehn.

Also in 1980, Debbie completed the Master's degree in Geology at the Pennsylvania State University. Her thesis topic was coring and analyzing buried peat deposits in the Gulf of Mexico in order to document global sea-level rise over the past 12,000 years.

In 1983, she earned her Ph.D. in Geology, also from Penn State. Her dissertation research involved characterizing the organic structure of coal using Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy. At the time, her work was considered to be a major breakthrough in understanding changes in certain coal properties at the molecular level.

Debbie's first professional position was for three years with the Department of Geosciences at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, where she served as Interim Department Head in 1983-84. In the summer of 1984, the Kuehn family moved to Bowling Green when Ken joined the regular faculty in Geography and Geology at Western Kentucky University (WKU).

Debbie served as an adjunct faculty member in the WKU departments of Chemistry and Geography/Geology from 1984-90. She worked full time from 1985-88 as editor of the *Journal of Coal Quality*, an international journal published by WKU aimed at helping coal analysts in the laboratory and in the workplace. She joined the regular faculty in Geography and Geology in 1991 and achieved the rank of Associate Professor before retiring in 1998 for health reasons.

She taught introductory geology, historical geology, sedimentology, and paleontology in the WKU geology program. During her academic career, Debbie was author or co-author of 33 technical publications in a variety of geoscience subdisciplines and acquired nearly \$100,000 in funding to support research for herself and her students. Debbie worked closely with students and was appreciated by them for her easy communication of complex material and for her caring, genial personality.

I'd like to read an excerpt from Debbie's goodbye letter to faculty and students that appeared in the Fall 1998 departmental newsletter, the GEOGRAM:

"Making the decision to leave Western this year was a very difficult one. Having an overactive conscience, I began wrestling two years ago with the knowledge that there would soon come a time when I could no longer meet my personal standards for what was expected of a faculty member. As a result, I decided to forego the request for tenure and 'retire.' For as long as it takes, I will be dedicating my time and energy to regaining my health.

"For all of the students I have taught since 1991, I say thank you for the fond memories with which I leave. Although some of you have given me more gray hairs than others, I treasure all the memories. Thank you for putting forth your best efforts in class and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to work with many of you on independent research projects. I hope the experiences I gave you allowed you to grow professionally, just as I grew from having known you and worked with you.

"I leave you with a pun from one of my introductory geology classes that best sums up my years here at Western: I have had a simply 'marble-ous' time teaching geology and I still 'shale' be around for hog roasts and other Department activities."

Since her retirement in 1998, Debbie remained active in the Department by helping with Geology Club fundraisers and other activities. She was a key figure every semester in the three-day sale of rocks, jewelry, and other goodies sponsored by the Geology Club.

On a personal level, Deb's friends and family remember her for many other talents beyond teaching:

** She enjoyed collecting and had numerous and assorted antiques and unique items.

** She enjoyed fine mineral samples and semi precious gems, especially making them into jewelry items.

** Debbie was an avid gardener and kept meticulous notes on her latest floral experiments.

** She enjoyed painting in watercolor and acrylics and had a fine eye for seeing what was 'good', or aesthetically pleasing, in nearly everything.

** She designed and decorated the unique home where the Kuehn family has lived since 1991. She loved to host parties and gatherings there.

**** She loved antique cars and could often be seen buzzing around Bowling Green either in her 1963 Ford Thunderbird or her latest, a 1961 diamond blue Thunderbird.**

Debbie had only 47 living years, but she accomplished more than most of us do in a full lifetime. She never wasted a minute unless her health kept her from being a participant. She was industrious, meticulous, and productive.

**I'd like to close by paraphrasing Deb's words from her retirement letter:
We have had a simply 'marble-ous' time knowing Debbie through our many interactions and we know that she 'shale' be around in our hearts and our memories for as long as we all live.**

*text by her loving husband,
Kenneth William Kuehn
February 11, 2002*

**From the Bowling Green Daily News, Bowling Green, Kentucky
Monday February 11, 2002**