

Heidi Kirk Duffy—IEP's Guardian Angel

As a high school student in Groanau, Germany, near the Dutch border, Heidi Kirk Duffy and a friend often visited the local airport, soaking up the excitement of travelers headed for exotic places. "We'd study the final destinations and drool," she recalls, little imagining that someday she would help other adventurous young people to experience living and working in a different culture.

Today, Heidi Kirk Duffy and her late husband Chester Kirk, founder of AMTROL, are considered guardian angels of URI's International Engineering Program (IEP). This five-year educational program was started in 1988. It combines a B.S. degree in engineering with a B.A. degree in language. A key feature of the popular program is a six-month internship abroad.

A lesson Heidi learned at a young age is that preparation is key to successful travel. Determined to become trilingual, she studied English in Germany, then spent a year in Paris mastering French. In 1963, she was working as an interpreter when she was hired to set up the office for AMTROL's first German subsidiary. She got her first taste of air travel at age 21 when she came to New York on company business. Her reaction to flight? "I thought I was in heaven."

She later married Chester Kirk, CEO of AMTROL, and visited many exotic spots with Kirk as he tended to his business interests all over the world. They often tied in a vacation on the tail end of business trips.

Kirk had five children from his previous marriage. He and Heidi raised two daughters of their own. But even when she was busy with young children, Heidi managed to run a small cultural exchange program. "I asked my sister in Dusseldorf if she knew of a young German girl who might like to switch places with our older daughter Christina so that each could learn the other's language and culture." The exchange was such a success that the girls have remained friends to this day. The Kirks' younger daughter Nicole also took part in a family-arranged exchange. Several other German families showed interest, and soon there was an informal exchange program going on in their community of North Kingstown.

When Kirk Duffy heard about the IEP program, she was eager to help. John Grandin, Chair of the URI Language Department and Director of the IEP, recalls, "She immediately clicked with the idea of our program. Heidi is wonderful to work with—a real doer. She'd ask, 'What do you need? What can we do for you?' Then, she'd go make a few calls. Soon, I'd get a letter from a German CEO saying his firm was interested in taking some of our students as interns. As a native German who has strong connections to the German business world, she's helped us build relationships with first-class companies overseas." Among those are such firms as Volkswagen, Mercedes Benz, and 2F Industries.

Heidi says that her husband's zeal for URI was inspiring and infectious. "Chet," Heidi notes, "was the first one in his family to go to college. He became a chemical engineer who built a company up to \$180 million in sales. And he attributed a great deal of his success to what he had learned at URI."

Kirk, class of 1940, shared his success with the University, becoming one of its staunchest benefactors. In 1981, URI awarded him an honorary doctorate in public service. In 1990, the Chester H. Kirk Distinguished Professorship in Chemical Engineering was set up with a \$1 million pledge. That same year, the Kirks presented a deferred gift of \$1 million which eventually will fund the Heidi Kirk Endowed Chair in Germanics. So generous were Kirk's continued philanthropic contributions to his alma mater that the University named the College of Engineering's new tech center as the Chester H. Kirk Advanced Technology Center. The building was dedicated a year after Kirk's 1996 death.

Kirk Duffy received an honorary doctorate in humane letters from URI in 1995. In 2000, the German government recognized Kirk Duffy's contribution to academic and economic exchanges between the United States and Germany by giving her its highest civilian award, The Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, First Class.

Today, Kirk Duffy is still traveling and enjoying it as much as ever. "When you begin traveling, the customs that you have been brought up with don't seem as important. You realize that others have equally compelling customs. You become more broad-minded."

As an IEP Advisory Board member, Kirk Duffy has an opportunity to meet with many of the students in the program. "It is so rewarding to observe their progress. When they leave, they are speaking the foreign language brokenly. They come back fluent. They also get hands-on experience in foreign companies. Many of the students later are hired by the companies where they did their internships."

Kirk Duffy is proud of the fact that URI has the largest number of German language students in the United States, largely, she points out, because of the IEP. In her mind, there's no doubt where much of the credit for the success of the IEP should go. "This program wouldn't exist without John Grandin. He has put his soul into it."

By Sylvia Smith

"As a native German who has strong connections to the German business world, she's helped us build relationships with first-class companies overseas."

—John Grandin

CHAIR OF THE URI LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT AND DIRECTOR OF IEP



Last fall, Kirk Duffy donated the Kirks' yacht Liberty to the Foundation's Boat Donation Program. Proceeds from the sale of the 72-foot fiberglass ketch will fund the purchase of the current Chi Phi fraternity house to be used as living quarters for students in the IEP. The funds will also pay for relocating Chi Phi to Fraternity Circle. IEP students, who will run the house themselves, will speak the foreign language in which they are majoring while residing in the house.

The custom-built Liberty is on the market for six figures. Several offers for the vessel are pending. To view the boat and get more information, visit the URI Foundation's web site at urifoundation.org. or call 401-846-7355.