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Home | [Article Archive: 2003-2004](#) [2002](#) [2001](#) [2000](#) | [April 2004 Article](#)

In Her Own Words

Author Kathleen Williams PhD, NCSP, reflects on her career, anticipates a new path, and shares what she's learned on the way

By Laura Kuhn

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Everyone has a story. Author Kathleen Williams leaves a lasting impression when you meet her. The amount of her accomplishments overwhelms the mind. You wonder what motivates her and where her energy comes from. Her reflections resonate for all who long for something more than a day-to-day existence—a real purpose.

The early years

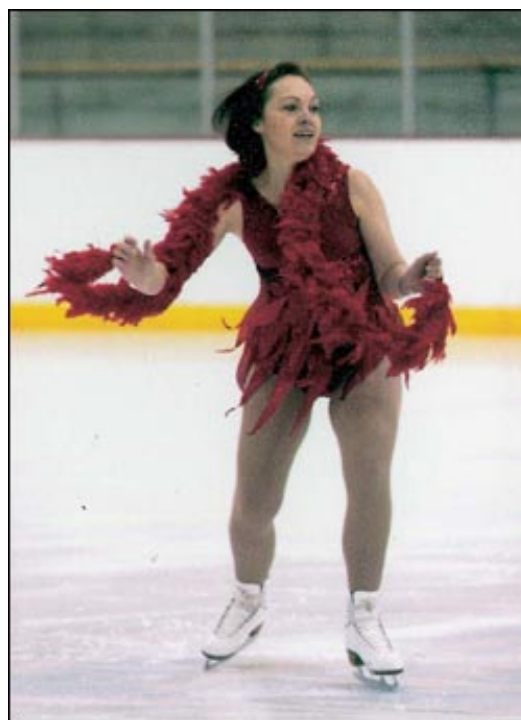
In 1970, with her audiology and speech science undergraduate degree in hand, Williams began her career at Michigan City Area Schools in Indiana. She first taught mentally handicapped students and later second grade. She also designed a summer reading program. Two years later she took a job in her field as a speech and hearing clinician in Valparaiso, Indiana. At the time, most speech-language pathologist positions were itinerant, working for three or more school districts, especially in rural areas.

Williams was responsible for serving kindergarten through grade 12 students from seven schools in the Porter County Special Education Cooperative. She explains, "These massive co-ops were created prior to Public Law 142, as states were moving towards mandatory special education services. I served across three school districts with three different superintendents and three different ways of doing paperwork. You found yourself doing very little real speech therapy."

Williams loved the work, but found balancing family responsibilities difficult as an itinerant speech-language pathologist. "It's hard for the babysitter to track you down," she adds. Wanting to return to a saner schedule, Williams obtained a master's in education in 1974, focusing on reading at the elementary level. For the next few years she taught first grade and remedial reading, and worked as a speech-language pathologist serving preschool children with disabilities.

Going back to school

In 1986 after her third child was born, Williams returned to school to pursue another master's degree, this one in educational psychology from Ball State University. Shortly thereafter, she worked on a doctorate in school psychology. Williams recalls writing her dissertation with her young son under her desk. "I thought I wanted a college teaching position to have more time for my family. However, it didn't work out that way."



Author Kathleen Williams, PhD, NCSP. January of 2000 she decided to take figure skating lessons. She was looking for a way to get a break, some exercise, and to clear her mind.

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As a doctoral school psychologist intern, Williams served gifted and at-risk children in Muncie, Indiana. She remembers one girl in particular who did not speak by choice, an "elective mute." This child was temporarily homeless, living in a car with her mother. Williams administered the [Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test](#) (PPVT) to her and was amazed by the girl's high score. She explained, "The PPVT is very unobtrusive. A child just points to a picture when you say a word. Despite this girl's very deprived environment, she somehow learned the vocabulary of the world. You don't do that unless you're very smart. Here's this bright penny. We've got to make sure we polish it."

Developing tests

The next phase of Williams' career took a new turn in 1989—towards test development. "The general consensus is that no one goes out there and says, 'Boy, I want to major in psychometrics and be a test developer.' It just happens," she explains. She first worked as a project director for the Psychological Corporation in Texas and in 1992 moved to AGS Publishing in Minnesota starting as associate director of assessment services and later was promoted to director of product development. In 2002 Williams was named the vice president of product development for AGS Publishing.

Test development clearly matched Williams' personality and work style. "I'm very detail-oriented and like working independently. Nobody has to give me a schedule. I don't need an imposed structure. There is an inherent structure to test development, but it's very iterative. Lots of times it feels as though you're on shifting sands," she says.

Change is a constant when developing tests. So, too, is problem solving. Williams found solving problems one of the most fulfilling aspects of her job. "It's rewarding to put together all my practical experience from my earlier years. It's interesting to be older and able to connect the dots when you're working on a project with a team and trying to find a solution. Your past experiences are helpful. Now you can show others how to pull information together, without being directive about it," she adds.

Williams' past experiences as a speech-language pathologist, reading teacher, and school psychologist are invaluable in the field of test development. She knows firsthand how difficult those jobs can be. She continues, "I was there . . . The job gets harder every year that money shrinks and paper work gets heavier." With her background she is able to integrate the user's point of view into the tests that her teams develop.

Williams describes how the contribution she's making has changed. "I make a difference in a broader way now because I'm developing materials that help more people and children. If the tests are more user-friendly for speech-language pathologists, if the assessments I help develop only identify those kids who need services and don't hang a label on a kid incorrectly, then I feel good."

In her current position she spends a lot of time with human resource issues, schedules, and budgets. Besides supervising the development of tests, Williams has authored several tests herself, such as the [Expressive Vocabulary Test](#), [Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation](#), [Reading-Level Indicator](#), [Group Math Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation](#), and [Math-Level Indicator](#).

On the road

One of Williams' favorite activities is presenting to groups at conferences and other venues. She feels it's vital to stay connected to speech-language pathologists and others in the trenches. "If I just stay in my office and try to direct the development of assessments and curriculum materials, I might turn into one of those people who wouldn't know a real kid if they tripped over one. I need to have a feel for what's going on out there."

Williams admits that public speaking is not easy for her. Her advice is to "over prepare, over prepare, over prepare." She is known to rewrite a presentation three or four times before being satisfied. "I remember sitting through a lot of talks and thinking that they weren't worth my time. So I try hard to know my audience beforehand and give them something useful. It's very humbling." She believes that when a presentation is well prepared, it appears more fluid and effortless to the audience.

Williams also makes it a priority to keep a pulse on the issues facing speech-language pathologists and other professionals. "While I'm speaking, I listen. And not just during the question and answer period, or during the comments afterwards. I listen to the way people react to pieces of information I present," she

says.

Managing time

Even though Williams works many evenings and weekends to keep up with her workload, she is able to maximize every hour of the week. She explains, "Because I'm still authoring tests, there's got to be a portion of my day that's spent on projects, such as writing test items or designing analysis."

Williams is a strong believer in the Swiss cheese technique. "I've used it the majority of my life. If you've got ten things to do and you're waiting until you have a block of time to work on each one, you'll never get anything done. Somehow I try to touch each thing that needs to be finished every day," she says. "Five minutes here. Ten minutes there."

Under the spotlight

It's also important to have an outlet beyond the workplace, according to Williams. In January of 2000 she decided to take figure skating lessons. She was looking for a way to get a break, some exercise, and to clear her mind. "In the beginning, I just wanted to do one thing on skates, like skate backwards. Today I'm up to the Freestyle 3 level." At that level Williams can perform a salchow, waltz jump, toe loop, a one-foot spin, among other elements.

As an older skating student, Williams cherished the younger skaters' show of support at a recent competition. While she was warming up for her program, the girls cheered, "Go, Kathleen!" and "You rock." During her Freestyle 3 program Williams skated to *Moonlight Serenade*. Then, for her spotlight performance, she skated to a *Roxy Heart* song wearing a red sequined costume and a feather boa.

"I have a great time skating. You have to have a little fun in your life."

The next chapter

Another door has opened for Williams. She recently accepted a position as vice president for product development at the College Board in New York. She will be leading the development of the new SAT and other tests and programs.

This new job might be like mastering the change foot spin in figure skating—an exciting new challenge that will encourage her to further stretch her skills.

The last word

When asked which achievements throughout her career stand out from the rest, Williams replies without a pause: "Of all my accomplishments, there are four that mean the most to me; Doug, Melinda, and Robert—my three talented, brilliant children—and my wonderful husband, Doug. At the end of the day, I know I have their love and support. What else could someone want?"

Everyone from the SpeechandLanguage.com staff and AGS Publishing extend our heartiest congratulations to Kathleen Williams on her new position. We will miss her greatly and her multitudinous contributions.

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