

Shirley Keller-Firestone

CHSSA HALL OF FAME 1992



Shirley Anne Burke Keller-Firestone was born in Rapid City, South Dakota and grew up on a sheep and cattle ranch in the northwest corner of the state. Since the ranch was forty-five miles from town, her dad built a house in Newell when she started high school. Here she first encountered debate as a sophomore. In those days a debate team consisted of four people—two debated affirmative and two debated negative.

Her college years were spent at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, with a major in speech, radio, and television. She became interested in that field after winning a radio speaking contest through 4-H. During her junior and senior years, she had a fifteen-minute children's show, *Candy Cane Lane*, on the college radio station. On the show, she read stories and then would talk about them with the children. She debated a couple of times and played minor roles in plays.

Her first teaching job was at Visalia's Mt. Whitney High School. Maude Prigg, the long-time drama teacher, had decided that doing drama was too much for her so Shirley took over. The Dean of Girls read and censored all of her plays. Shirley says, "It was a very interesting year..." During this time she met and married Gordon Keller. He wanted to move to Santa Clara. So, of course, she went with him. CHSSA Hall of Famer Larry Smith took her position at Mt. Whitney.

She was hired full time in Gilroy because the head of the English department had died tragically from cancer. The forty-five minute commute to Gilroy proved difficult, however. She soon applied to districts in and around San Jose. The principal of Fremont High School was also a former resident of South Dakota, but she jokes that she likes to think she would have gotten the job anyway. She was assigned to help Carmendale Fernandes (Hall of Famer) with the speech team and direct the school musical. When Lynbrook High opened, she interviewed for the job of TV director, but the principal thought it should go to a man. The next year, the speech director job opened and she applied and was hired. Her junior debate team went to the state tournament her second year at Lynbrook, and there was at least one qualifier from Lynbrook to State every year for—the thirty-four years she continued to coach.

Shirley served as league president, area chair (two separate times), league congress vice-president, curriculum representative, and NFL district chairperson. She was inducted to the CHSSA Hall of Fame in 1992 and the NFL Hall of Fame in 1996.

Her second husband, Jerry Firestone, became her assistant coach. Several students have indicated to her that speech and debate was the most valuable activity they did in high school. In her words— "My greatest hope is that I have helped younger coaches master the details that will make them great coaches. I thank my dad for pushing me into education: I thank my family for supporting me: and I thank my colleagues for great memories."

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