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Never an Also-Ran

"My forebears and Alan's came to this country from Eastern and Central Europe in search of freedom and liberty. Those shining rights of all of us are burning in me."

As a young girl, Audrey Carlan adored math. The lone girl in her junior high school math class, she won the class algebra award. It would be the first of many firsts for this resident of Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

In 1957 she became the first woman to earn a WPI degree, a master of science in physics, which was also the first advanced degree the University awarded in that discipline (women undergraduates would not be admitted to WPI until 1968). Her thesis, completed using an IBM 650 computer, probably also earned her, in a practical sense, the first WPI degree in computer science.

When she and her husband, Alan Carlan, enrolled at WPI, they were working on aspherics and multi-focal lenses for continuous vision at American Optical Company's world headquarters in Southbridge, Mass., where they also helped develop Todd-AO, the groundbreaking film projection system first used to project Oklahoma! "We were hungry to learn," she says.

Their working group asked WPI to teach them advanced mathematics, optics and physics, and arrangements were made, in another WPI first, for both off- and on-campus courses. "When Alan and I received our degrees together," she says, "we became WPI's first married couple to do so, and I walked across the stage a pregnant woman--another first for WPI. Months later, when I gave birth to Stephen, he became the first child with a WPI alumna for a mom."

Alan was a candidate, four times overall, for City Council and State Assembly; Audrey managed his campaigns. She built a career as a teacher and author. She is a professor emeritus of mathematics in the Los Angeles Community College District. Her most recent book, *Everyday Math for the Numerically Challenged*, helps the popular reader grasp percentages, algebra and probabilities, and demystifies charts and graphs, which, she points out, "can be used to fool people. People are entitled to the truth."



Having crisscrossed America with their small children, son David and daughter Susan, and traveled around the globe several times, the Carlans now preside over a lush flowering garden and orchard of more than 50 fruit trees on a hill behind their nine-room home of 35 years.

They sold their 29-foot sloop in 1998, but Audrey and Alan, who hold the highest navigator's credentials, still manage races and teach sailing courses. They used to play fierce duplicate bridge, but other commitments now press upon them. They were competitive square dancers, but, Audrey acknowledges, they have "slacked off because you need good knees."

If there was a pattern in the many firsts in this remarkable career, it was hardly planned, says Audrey, who credits the late Harold Osterberg, her AO mentor, for inspiring her to excel. "Turn light on and off at the frequency of life," he told me, and that ambition of his instantly became mine. I was thrilled by those words.

"I'm an idealist," she adds in her Brooklyn-inflected clear voice. That helps explain, she fervently notes, why she and Alan hold leadership posts in the Libertarian Party. "My forebears and Alan's came to this country from Eastern and Central Europe in search of freedom and liberty. Those shining rights of all of us are burning in me."



Audrey Carlan '57

