

Influential Women highlights Irene White Sharpe, a retired engineer whose 37-year career advanced automotive design.

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Reflecting on a Legacy of Technical
Excellence, Leadership, and Advocacy for
Women Engineers in Male-Dominated
Industries

West Bloomfield, Michigan — Irene White Sharpe is a retired Principal Engineer with a distinguished career spanning more than 37 years in the automotive and other engineering industries. Beginning her professional journey in 1963 as an electrical engineer, she built an accomplished career working across some of the most influential organizations in the United States, including the U.S. Government, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, and United Technologies Automotive. Her work focused on electrical systems design, project management, technical documentation, and engineering supervision, while also dedicating significant effort to mentoring emerging engineers throughout her career.



From the earliest stages of her professional life, Irene demonstrated a commitment to technical excellence, problem-solving, and continuous learning. She developed deep expertise in electrical systems and engineering operations, contributing to complex projects within highly regulated and rapidly evolving industries. In addition to her technical responsibilities, she consistently took on leadership and supervisory roles, helping to guide teams and ensure quality and precision in engineering outcomes.

Irene's professional philosophy has long centered on technical curiosity, perseverance, and mutual support. Throughout her career, she has been a strong advocate for women in engineering, actively supporting, mentoring, and hiring women engineers whenever possible.

She participated in professional organizations such as the Society of Women Engineers, Society of Automotive Engineers, and the American Association of University Women, using these platforms to strengthen professional networks and encourage greater inclusion within the field. Her advocacy and leadership helped open doors for many women pursuing careers in traditionally male-dominated engineering environments.

A proud alumna of Howard University, Irene earned her Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering, laying the academic foundation for her decades-long career. She later expanded her expertise through professional development studies in Engineering Management at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Over the course of her career, her accomplishments were recognized through numerous honors, including designation as a Notable American of the Bicentennial Era, Charter Member of the National Women's History Museum, and recognition as an Extraordinary Woman Engineer by her inclusion in *Changing Our World: True Stories of Women Engineers*.

Irene attributes her success to the strong support system she had throughout both her academic and professional life. She credits her husband as a major source of encouragement during difficult periods in her career, particularly at times when she considered leaving the engineering field. His consistent belief in her abilities helped her persist through challenges and remain committed to her profession during demanding moments.

She also emphasizes the critical role played by the Society of Women Engineers in sustaining her career. The encouragement, mentorship, and shared experiences of other women engineers provided essential emotional and professional support. Even during her time as a student, Irene benefited from early mentorship and encouragement from women already established in the engineering field. One engineer from Westinghouse played a pivotal role in her development by regularly bringing her to Society of Women Engineers meetings, helping her build early professional connections.

As she transitioned from academic life into her engineering career, this network of support continued to play a vital role. When Irene relocated to Denver for work, members of her professional network proactively informed the Denver Section of the Society of Women Engineers of her arrival, ensuring she was welcomed into the engineering community. This sense of belonging and shared purpose helped stabilize and strengthen her early career experiences.

Irene notes that having a community of women who understood the challenges of the profession was essential in helping her remain in the field. The shared resilience, encouragement, and solidarity within this network played a significant role in her decision to continue her engineering career during difficult periods.

When reflecting on the best career advice she received, Irene points to guidance from a professor at Howard University who emphasized the importance of attending an accredited engineering program. This advice helped her make critical academic decisions that strengthened

her long-term professional credibility. She also highlights the ongoing encouragement she received from her peers and husband, who consistently urged her to remain focused and committed during challenging times.

For young women entering the engineering profession, Irene strongly encourages persistence, confidence, and self-belief. She advises against allowing others to define personal limitations and emphasizes the importance of pursuing goals regardless of external doubt or discouragement. Much of her own motivation, she notes, was shaped by moments when others told her she could not succeed—fueling her determination to prove otherwise and excel in her field.

Irene also reflects on the encouragement she received through the Society of Women Engineers, where members reinforced the belief that women should pursue their professional goals without restriction. This shared mindset of resilience and determination continues to shape her perspective on professional growth and personal development.

Irene identifies both historical and ongoing challenges within the engineering field, particularly the longstanding gender imbalance in technical industries. In earlier decades, engineering teams were overwhelmingly male, making it more difficult for women to access mentorship, peer support, and professional advancement opportunities. These conditions highlighted the importance of building intentional professional communities for women in STEM.

At the same time, Irene recognizes meaningful progress in the field today, including increased recruitment efforts, improved visibility for women engineers, and expanded mentorship and professional development programs. She views these changes as essential for strengthening the future of engineering and ensuring that the profession reflects broader diversity and inclusion.

Throughout her career, Irene has prioritized values such as determination, independence, perseverance, and mutual support for other women. These principles have guided her professional decisions and shaped her long-standing commitment to uplifting others in the field. She emphasizes that mutual support among women is particularly powerful, noting that encouragement and mentorship can significantly influence long-term success and career sustainability.

Even in retirement, Irene White Sharpe continues to serve as a mentor and advocate for women in engineering. Her legacy reflects not only decades of technical achievement in automotive and other areas of engineering design, but also a lifelong commitment to empowering others, strengthening professional communities, and advancing opportunity within engineering.

Learn More about Irene White Sharpe:

Through her Influential Women profile: <https://influentialwomen.com/connect/irene-sharpe>

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