Come Celebrate with us!

by Karen Panetta, Chair, IEEE Boston Section

Can you believe another year is almost over? And what a year it has been. This is my last editorial as your Boston Section Chair, but don’t worry, you can’t get rid of me that easily. I will still write editorials for the Boston Section Reflector and will remain committed to supporting the IEEE Boston Section as the Junior Past Chair.

This year, the Boston Section was honored with two IEEE Milestones. For those you unfamiliar with IEEE Milestones or of their importance, let me give you some background. IEEE milestones recognize the most significant technical innovations in the fields of electrical and computer engineering. Innovations dating back to Benjamin Franklin and Alessandro Volta are recognized by the IEEE so that the world can appreciate their contributions and the historical significance of each milestone. The IEEE Boston Section leads the IEEE in the sheer number of designated milestones.

One of my favorite Boston based milestones is the first electrified railway, which is publicly designated by a plaque at the Park Street train station in downtown Boston. You can amaze your friends with historic engineering trivia and get to learn about the talented engineers who made them happen. On one occasion, I happened to walk by Park Street train station accompanied by one of my PhD students. I was so excited to point out the plaque to him as we entered the station.

He asked, “Where you involved in making that happen?” I honestly think he thought that I was alive when the subway became electrified. I jokingly reminded him that this was not a good thing to say to a young woman, especially one who determines when you get to graduate!

In December, we will be celebrating two milestones. One is the Apollo Guidance system, which helped bring our astronauts to the moon and back safely, and the second milestone recognizes the first network transmission packet.

I was fortunate to meet and work with one of the engineers who worked on the Apollo mission. Jack was a graduate student at MIT at the time. He used to recall how grateful the astronauts were to everyone on the team for ensuring they made it home safely. He said they actually came to Boston to personally thank everyone including the students. When was the last time any client or customer of yours made a visit just to say thank you?

I have been fortunate to meet Neil Armstrong and even have a great picture of us together. During many of my outreach presentations that I conduct all around the world, I show the picture and say, “This is a picture of me with the first man to walk on the moon.”

Then, I ask who knows his name. In countries like India, I will have an audience of 500 students say his name without hesitation. Unfortunately, here in the U.S., my question is usually met with silence or one brave kid will shout out with confidence, “That is Louie Armstrong!”

Hopefully, the IEEE milestone for the Apollo Guidance system will help students remember Neil Armstrong for his outstanding historic achievements and for the engineering innovations it took to get him to the moon. For all I know, Neil may also play the trumpet and be an excellent musician. I will have to ask him next time I see him. I am pretty sure he is not related to Louie Armstrong.

I would like to thank Gil Cooke for his amazing successes at coordinating and writing all of the IEEE Boston milestone nominations. True to his name, Gil is already “cooking” up new milestones and educating us all on the historic innovations that took place right here in the Boston Section. On behalf of the Boston Section, thank you Gil!

This year also marks the anniversary of the Telephone Pioneers Centennial celebration. Members included Alexander Graham Bell and the organization has been continuing to celebrate the technological advances made over the century. Happy 100th Birthday and welcome to Boston from all of us at IEEE!

Finally, we look forward to next year as our own Boston Section member, Peter Staecker assumes the role of IEEE President and leads our organization into a new year full of great and successful initiatives. Congratulations Peter! The IEEE Boston Section volunteers are eager for lots more work so bring it on!

(Note: Details for the Apollo Guidance Computer Milestone can be found on page 2. Details for the Packet Network Milestone can be found on page 19)