

The road to Kashmir

BY RICHARD NIX

A reflection on Karl Ruling's extraordinary contributions to ESTA's Technical Standards Program

大光の音

The journey begins.

"IT WAS A SINGLE-TRACK ROAD which neatly cut through the desert. Two miles to the east and west were ridges of sand rock. It looked like you were driving down a channel, this dilapidated road, and there was seemingly no end to it." This thought, as related to Cameron Crowe by none other than Robert Plant, begat the lyrics to Led Zeppelin's song "Kashmir", describing his thoughts about a trip along a path that wound on, and on, for a very long time.

Etymology for the word Kashmir has many colorful origins dating back at least twenty-three centuries. The geographical region known as Kashmir is a dry lakebed, in a deep valley between two mountainous ranges, and one regional interpretation says the word means "a land desiccated from water"—inspirational imagery for describing travel through the desert. It's an area referred to in Sanskrit as Kashyapamara, the "land of Kashyap." Kashyapa was a Vedic sage said to have settled people in this land, hence transforming the place name into kashyapa-mir (Kashyapa's Lake) or kashyapa-meru (Kashyapa's Mountain).

"Kashmir" the song is not at all about Kashmir the politically charged northwest region of the Indian subcontinent. Rather, it is perhaps a metaphor for a far-off oasis destination at the end of a long and arduous journey, like writing a standard, or—in another's interpretation—a simile for a time of retirement after a long and fruitful career. For most of us, our journeys will have included a slice of time when we begin to

realize the significant influence that certain special individuals have had on us. Such influences manifest in many forms: patience, leadership, knowledge, guidance, and enlightenment. Rare indeed is an individual who exemplifies all of these things, so it's an honor to pay homage to one such amazing individual who has touched my life and career in such a way: My predecessor and mentor, sensei Karl Ruling. Walk with me for a moment...

My own interest and experience with standards development predates ESTA's standards program, beginning in 1993 while attending my very first USITT conference in Nashville, Tennessee, and in the standing-room-only meeting room where the Engineering Commission's Rigging Standards meeting was hosted. There I was, barely seven years into my young career, thoroughly engaged in a lively discussion about rigging standards. That there had been high-level discussions about how to turn the USITT rigging standards project into national standards, only fueled the wildfire rumors of ESTA's plan to secure a standards development program accreditation from ANSI, and—by then—it had become evident that USITT was not equipped to establish a bona fide standards development program. I knew I wanted to be a part of it, whatever "it" was. Sometime in 1994, inspired by Jay Glerum, I started attending ESTA meetings, asking how to be a part of this new program, and in 1995 began attending the first standards meetings. That same year, the first version of the Policies & Procedures was approved

by ANSI, making ESTA the secretariat of Accredited Standards Committee E1—we were off and running! Ralph Weber, Karl's predecessor, and the first Technical Standards Officer, filled the position until around June of 1996. Ralph was a whiz with standards processes but knew little about our industry, so the Technical Standards Committee (as it was known back then) had already been searching for someone with a little more related experience and background, to fill the position on a longer-term basis.

During this same time, Karl was working as the technical editor for *Lighting Dimensions* and *Theatre Crafts* magazines—a position he had taken in 1990, upon the influence of two women: Marti LoMonaco, "...a theatre director and Karl's intended" (now his wife), and Pat MacKay, the woman who hired him at the magazines. His tenured entertainment industry experience as a stagehand, designer, technician, teacher, and (then) editor made him a prime candidate for the ESTA position, so Karl became the new Technical Standards Manager, in June 1996. I first met him at the November 1996 Rigging Working Group meeting in Orlando, where the creation of the USITT Rigging Task Group was made official. This meeting would be the start of a career-long journey in standards. Who knew? Since much of my career's journey has involved standards development in one way or another, from that aspect Karl has been the single most influential person throughout, in more ways than he could have known...until now.

Fuel for the journey.

No matter the communication vehicle—spoken or written... be it technical, descriptive, or critical—Karl Ruling has a wonderful turn of phrase. Some of us who know him well keep our library of favorites—little gems of wisdom at our fingertips—ready to quote on a moment’s notice. In *The Sandman: A Dream of a Thousand Cats*, Neil Gaiman wrote, “I would like to see anyone, prophet, king or God, convince a thousand cats to do the same thing at the same time.” Once, while explaining the intrinsic value of giving an easy solution to someone so they wouldn’t have to work hard to create it themselves, Karl wrote to me, “People say writing standards is like herding cats. It is, but herding cats is easy if you make going where you want the cat to go be the easiest thing for the cat.” It takes a collective effort to write standards, though often enough it is one voice that leads a charge. Those who write standards understand the value of healthy debate, and of working together. Yet it is often the work of one—or the few—that herds the cats towards Kashmir’s gateway.

Listening is a skill most of us possess, some of us practice, but few of us master it. One of the Technical Standards Manager’s responsibilities is that of secretariat, or scribe, for each of the working groups, taking notes that eventually translate into meeting minutes. It’s safe to say that everyone present in working group meetings has seen Karl there, too, listening intently... typing intermittently. During most meetings, he speaks very little, usually on matters of procedure, but occasionally to interject a conversation or debate with the words, “What I’m hearing is,” followed by an insightful translation of the discussion he’d just absorbed. A few will have also been present to witness his bottle rocket left arm, launching up at a slight angle, its report almost always prefaced with, “I’m taking my ESTA staff hat off now.” On most occasions, the report flashed a big light, like Polaris

guiding ships at sea under the night sky.

I recall, early on in my standards journey, naively suggesting that he might consider being more careful with expressing his opinions in the working group forum, because he’s perceived as the face of the standards program, and—whether he knew it or not—his opinion carried gravitas with potentially distracting influence on the debate. He smiled knowingly, then quickly and carefully explained that there were times when productive discussion deteriorates into nonproductive debate, bogged down in minutia, or sidetracked by contention, so he felt obliged to help nudge things in a more productive direction by expressing an opinion objectively, as someone not vested in the immediate discussion. I remember feeling like one of the cats, in the dark, as the light bulb came on in the northern sky.

In those early days, many of us young, enthusiastic newcomers to the standards program were eager to contribute time and energy to whatever task group assignments came along. Naturally, I volunteered to work on the Counterweight Rigging Systems standard, eventually becoming its task group leader and scribe. Thus, as one might imagine, a good part of that involved pestering the Technical Standards Manager with questions about grammar and style, or just generally asking for advice. Karl was always available, though I cannot fathom there weren’t times when he hung up the phone—or (further down the road) clicked send on an email reply—shaking his head, with a roll of his eyes. Well, if he did, I never knew it, because Karl has always been one to offer guidance, even if it comes as a lesson learned.

There came a time when I wanted to explore writing outside of the standards realm. I asked him for constructive criticism, and he said that I wrote in purple prose. At first, this offended me; I didn’t know what “writing in purple prose” meant! I soon realized the value of this advice, after just a few minutes of research. His feedback gave me pause to evaluate many things about my writing habits: It taught

me to recognize the importance of voice, clarity, and conciseness, at a time when I thought all I wanted was to make a good impression using the written word. Those lessons continue to influence my approach to writing, although the true lessons learned went towards a much deeper understanding of how to be thick-skinned in receiving constructive criticism, and—even more importantly—how to soften the blow when giving it. Scrutiny of one’s words by others, peers and strangers alike, is an essential part of the standards process. No matter how much we think we understand this irrefutable inevitability, those words written by eager scribes remain personal to them—like their very own children. Karl says criticizing the words of someone who doesn’t write for a living is “...like telling your neighbor that they dress their kids funny. They’ll take offense even if it’s a dog’s breakfast...!” I bolster this lesson learned with the sage advice of former *New York Times* word maven and lexicographer, William Safire, who wrote [paraphrased], “People tend to write as they speak, and that’s just wrong!” I still write in purple prose, though it’s generally reserved for a deeper, more meaningful purpose.

Many sights to see.

Ever the tinkerer and quintessential technician, Karl is also a multifaceted gem of a designer. Until just recently, his wife, Marti, was very active in directing, which naturally meant that her favorite designer was always at the top of her tech call list. If they weren’t both going to see someone else’s show together, he’s probably doing technical design for one of her shows. Some of his *Protocol* articles have included photos of his design handiwork, often in support of an obscure yet relevant lede he’d decided to use for the story. His set design work can be seen as part of his TSP News article in the Summer ‘23 edition of *Protocol*, a photo of The Stone Chorus, from Fairfield University’s production of Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, enhances his article



lede, cleverly contrasting the life of busy, busy, busy stones with the amount of time it takes to write standards. But wait, there's more! Almost three years ago, about a week after my wife and I were married, a toaster arrived in the mail. It wasn't just any toaster. It was an old Hamilton Beach Model 22779, gutted and retrofitted with multi-color LED engines that spread a rainbow of light out of the toast slots, onto the ceiling of my kitchen. It came with a card that read, "What do you get newlyweds for a wedding present? A toaster of course!" In short time I learned that he bought toasters from yard sales, for retrofitting into just such devices to give as gifts. Our toaster is always "on", so the otherwise dark kitchen stays colorfully and quietly lit at night. Karl's quality seal of approval is firmly affixed to the bottom: 大光 (Big Light).

Task group members who have met in person during our quarterly meetings have also witnessed Karl's handiwork. When ESTA decided to provide conference microphones for the task group members to plug into laptops, we bought Shure



Big Light toasters - guaranteed for warm glowing elements!

CVB boundary microphones. Karl went to his garage shop workbench and hand-built two 6-watt mini amplifiers, and eight accompanying mini speaker enclosures—two complete systems we affectionately refer to as Kim Jong Un and Kim Jong Deux. True to form, Karl's quality seal of approval is affixed to the back of those amplifiers, too: 大光の音 入力 12V, 2A (The sound of the great light, sound input 12V, 2A). They'd been around for a few years before I had the opportunity to set up the systems for the first time, but when it happened, I noticed the Kanji characters and scanned them into my phone's translator, thinking it was simplified Chinese. Because of a single unrecognized character (the curly one), the translation yielded multiple results, beginning with "Big light, no sound", "light without sound", "great light of sound", and "the sound of great light": dàguāng zhīshēng in literal pinyin. I later learned that the characters were Japanese, which also



大光の音 入力 12V, 2A (Sound of the great light, sound input 12V, 2A)

translated cleanly into English as "sound of the great light", or omitsu no on, from which the "no on" part got easily cross-pollinated into what we now know as Big Light No Sound—yet another fitting metaphor of Karl's ability to quietly light the path (big light), with minimal words (no sound). Those labels were a catalyst for learning that Karl speaks a little Japanese, having visited there a few times in his life, and learning that he'd studied Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism (among other religions) as part of his own personal study path, teachings of which he also manages to cleverly work into his *Protocol* article ledes.

This brings us back around to our journey to Kashmir. The word is referenced in a Hindu mantra worshipping the goddess Sharada, also known as Saraswati, but may have also been a reference to the Sharada Peeth, the ruined Hindu temple and ancient center of learning, in Kashmir.



*Namaste Shaarade Devii
Kaashmiira-Pura-Vaasini
Tvaam-Aham Praarthaye Nityam
Vidyaa-Daanam Ca Dehi Me*

*Salutations to Devi Sharada,
who abide in the abode of Kashmira,
To You, O Devi, I always pray (for
Knowledge); Please bestow on me the
gift of that Knowledge (which illumines
everything from within).*

Saraswati (Sharada), is known as the “goddess of knowledge, language, music, and all arts, also symbolic of creative energy in all its forms, including longing and love.” Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, flowing water, abundance and wealth, art, speech, wisdom, and learning.

It’s obvious to me that Karl has spent much of his journey understanding Saraswati, and what She represents; it shows in almost everything Karl says and does.

My favorite scarf is faded black and gray, adorned with images of four-armed elephants and Sanskrit. For many years I wondered what it all meant. On a whim, and because of his worldly knowledge, I sent Karl a photo, to which he immediately replied, Oh! That’s Ganesha, the Hindu Supreme God, remover of obstacles, Lord of lettering and learning, and bringer of good luck—a very good thing to have on a wearable garment! Of course, Karl would know this. A few days later a package arrived in the mail, *Ganesha Goes to Lunch*, a small book of Hindu stories and fables, which he thought I would enjoy reading—and I did so enjoy reading it!

At USITT, Karl will be presented the 2024 Distinguished Achievement in Engineering Award, honoring individuals who have established meritorious career records in specific fields of expertise...

All of these things were seen along the journey to Kashmir, but it wasn’t until 2018—after I became ESTA staff, as Karl’s assistant, and he as my adopted sensei—that I found myself truly in frequent presence of the man himself, the one whom I’d known for many years as being “in charge” but had never faced him as one in charge. He made me feel like an equal, as he gradually stepped

back from his position, so I could step into mine, finally one day saying to me, “Richard, you have to take my position when I retire, so I know things will be in good hands.” When the weight finally settled, I realized the importance of the journey.

Sound of the great light.

Creative inspiration takes all forms and comes from many places—often when one least expects it. As I sat down to write this tribute, I began thinking about what I could say that would be meaningful and then started writing. Soon I was stuck in a rut, wondering how I would tie it all together—I didn’t have a lede, yet. I struggled for a while before hearing more of Karl’s kind words of wisdom echoing familiar: “Sometimes, you just have to write something, even if it makes no sense at first. Sooner or later, it’ll work itself out, and the story will flow.” Music played in the background. The more I wrote, the more I worried this would become the making of a dog’s breakfast. As I struggled to overcome the block, inspiration came from the music. The unmistakable heavy guitar riff began to play, and then

the lyrics: “Oh let the sun beat down upon my face. Stars to fill my dreams.” I paused to listen, then smiled knowingly as Sensei Karl’s words began to drift away, off into the distance: Standards take a long time... Indeed they do. They grow at the pace of very busy, busy stones, their second breath often years after the first, just as the road to standards seems endless at times, a desert

path, winding across a barren land, on the way to Kashmir.

Lately, Karl’s favorite virtual meeting background has been a photo he took years ago, while in Japan. He is the foreground subject standing on a pathway in a Japanese cemetery on Mount Koya, the lamp-lined path fading behind him, in a mystically poignant scene. The first time I saw it, I remarked that it seemed like somewhat of a morbid background for a WebEx meeting. Karl simply said that it was a reminder that we won’t live forever and that he liked that photo in particular. I thought to myself, first Kashmir, then Nirvana.

Karl’s arrived at the outskirts of his retirement Kashmir, long before I’ll arrive at mine. Our journeys are separate, but we’ll both have peace in knowing that we shared part of those journeys together—me shape-shifting between driver and passenger, and him: Stagehand, technician, tinkerer, designer, painter, carpenter, journalist, author, critic, standards manager, sensei, teacher, mentor, leader, perhaps even a friend—a friendly giant, ever nearby. Make no mistake about the gravitas this humble giant’s voice carries, always in the background, always a guiding light. The sound of great light. Big Light, No Sound.

At USITT, Karl will be presented the 2024 Distinguished Achievement in Engineering Award, honoring individuals who have established meritorious career records in specific fields of expertise in any area of design or technology in the performing arts or entertainment industry. It’s an award that he has earned and so very much deserves. Long after the celebration ends, I’m sure he’ll remain the sound of great light for many more years to come. ■



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The great and honorable Karl G. Ruling

BY ERIN GRABE

I have a great many people to thank for giving me the tools to be a good person and helping me find my successes in life. It's an Oscar-type speech that begins with my parents, my sister, my aunts, and the rest of my family; moves on to my teachers, my mentors, and the people who gave me opportunities in this industry; and ends with a last but most important shout-out to my loving wife (plus a pitch for each of us to be more eco-conscious in our daily lives).

Other than my family, however, no single person has made a more profound impact on me than Karl Ruling. I don't tell or show him that often enough—a fault of mine.

When I was in high school and didn't have money for magazine subscriptions, there were these things called bookstores where I could go to read up on the latest industry news in *Theatre Crafts* magazine. It would be almost two decades before I connected the dots and put one of the magazine authors' names and pictures to an in-person face, and that author was Karl G. Ruling. There was no way to know our paths would eventually cross, and the idea that such a thing was ever possible was completely non-existent to me in the 1990's.

In 2013, I began working as Assistant Technical Standards Manager (ATSM) under Karl's supervision (See the NATEAC Q&A on page 12 for a little on how I got there). Karl taught me how to run the Technical Standards Program—becoming only the second of a kind. By the end of my five years as ATSM, I was fluent in the TSP's Policies & Procedures, had completed an ANSI audit almost completely on my own, and was on a trajectory toward becoming Technical Standards Manager, should Karl ever step

in front of a bus (his words) or decide to retire. That track, for me, never came to fruition, because the opportunity to become Executive Director of ESTA presented itself first. On me taking that role, instead of eventually taking his, Karl noted that there would be no Technical Standards Program without ESTA, so tending to ESTA was more important.

Karl is what you might call a jack-of-all-trades-master-of-most type of person, which is evident in the lasting contributions he has made to all ten of ESTA's Technical Standards Program working groups and their standards: Control Protocols, Electrical Power, Event Safety, Floors, Fog & Smoke, Followspot Positions, Photometrics, Rigging, Stage Machinery, and Weapons Safety. For over twenty-five years, Karl has woven his mastery of the TSP's Policies & Procedures with his passion for art and all things technical and leaves in his wake a strong, well-oiled standards development organization through which this industry may create their own rules and guidelines. The TSP would look very different today, were it not for the patience, understanding, and analytical eye of the great and honorable Karl Ruling.

Karl is deeply funny and kind-hearted, as well. Since 2013, I've been keeping a log of humorous quotes and nuggets of wisdom he has shared with me over the years. Even taken out of context, I hope you find light and some humor in these examples as much as I do.

"We never make mistakes. We used to think we did, but we were wrong."

"Reminders are just another chance to make a mistake."

"My black cats shed black hair, and there is no point in getting upset because it

doesn't match the color of the furniture."

"I'm just a mushroom—I sit back here and they feed me shit."

"If we tell people nothing, we will never be wrong!"

"But if you start worrying about it now, you can get a head start on it!"

"'Quick question' but there are no quick answers!"

"I won't pretend that it did or can change the world, but if we do nothing, we will have done nothing."

To say that Karl is thoughtful is an understatement. Karl teaches me to remember the footsteps behind me each day. Not just my footsteps or my ancestors, but the footsteps of human existence that brought each of us here. Karl also teaches me to walk thoughtfully, speak thoughtfully,



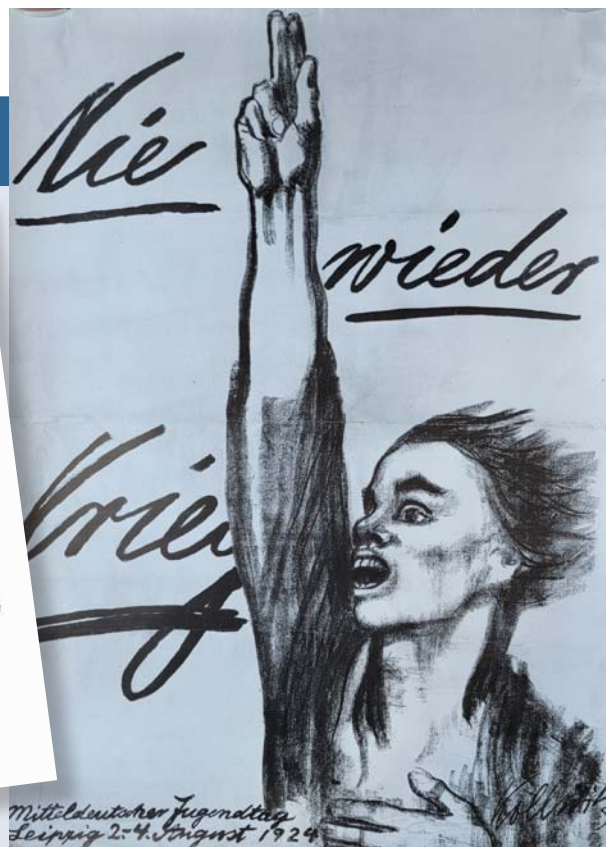
I also got a Big Light toaster when I got married!

and listen thoughtfully. Through his practice of thoughtfulness and mindfulness, Karl has made the traits second nature to his personality. For me, these traits are life-long goals that will require maintenance and reminding.

In September 2016, Karl sent me a book. I think it was Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for a Time Being*, but I can't find the book right now to be sure. Karl's wife Marti LoMonaco had highlighted a quote in the book, but Karl wanted me to know he hadn't specially highlighted the quote for me. Of the highlighted text, Karl wrote to me:

The quote goes something like, "You always are who you've always been. You just keep finding new ways to express yourself." I don't think I agree because it supposes an immutable self, and people change. There is a self that carries on through a lifetime, but it's more useful to call it "the Witness" because it is what we remember of thoughts, events, and feelings. That said, what we do with those memories and how we act in the here and now is not fixed. Still, perhaps that quote is supposed to be some sort [of] assurance for people... afraid of losing themselves in events. You can never lose yourself, but you might change.

Even though Karl hadn't intended to call out that quote for me, I'm glad that Marti highlighted it, because it led to the quote from Karl about never being able to lose yourself. As part of the human experience, it seems to me, that we sometimes think and say we've lost ourselves, but perhaps we are just in a period of change. Recognition of that change may just be a part of finding yourself, again.



A gift from Karl: Käthe Kollwitz poster and note.

Karl has left an undeniable, indelible mark not only on me but on this industry. Karl is the kind of wonderful and exhilarating one might feel about a beautiful and moving story that brings a tear to your eye (of which he owns myriad—seriously, Karl, write a memoir.) Whether you understand the full depth and breadth of it or not, our industry (and my life) is better for having Karl as a part of it.

We all owe Karl a debt of gratitude for heaving his knowledge, experience, and expertise into ESTA's Technical Standards Program. Karl is not quite yet retired from the TSP, but, as he is set to receive the USITT 2024 Distinguished Achievement in Engineering Award, there is no better time to express gratitude and appreciation to him for all he's done.

On behalf of ESTA and the entertainment technology industry, thank you Karl Ruling. ■



Erin showing Snap Chat filters to Karl in 2017.