[Podcast interview with Vicki Almstrum by Pat Phillips for the CSTA website]
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PP: I’m visiting with Vicki Almstrum from The University of Texas at Austin and she’s involved with an amazing project that it’s a wonder that people didn’t decide to do this a long time ago, but I want her to tell you about the oral history project that she is working on for Computer Science. So, Vicki, welcome.

VA: Thank you. The Computing Educators Oral History Project, or as we have come to pronounce it “SEE ‘OPE”, is the project that is attempting to gather stories from computing educators to, partially, help capture this part of history, but really more look at the pathways that people have followed in the process of their careers. We realized at the 2003 SIGCSE Symposium in Reno that these stories are being lost. There are many people who were among those who have taught the individuals who are the innovators from the last 30 years, and these people are nearing retirement or some of them we have already lost and many of these people are women. So it was especially the stories of women that inspired us to start this project. Eric Roberts of Stanford University was the Outstanding Educator Award winner that year and his keynote talk really emphasized the need for diversity. There is a book called Unlocking the Clubhouse that is a study of the situation at Carnegie Mellon University and the differences that women experienced and the authors of that, Margolis and Fisher, were the keynotes speakers. The conversation in the hallways and at the receptions was very much focused on “We need to capture these stories; there are important things to be said.” So we ended up proposing a Working Group on the conference on [Innovation and] Technology in Computer Science Education in 2005. We created a report that describes what one needs to do to collect a good oral history. We created a set of probing questions that looked at the influences on a person’s life, from parents, to siblings, to education, and the career choices they made along the way, so that we had a basic format to follow in collecting these interviews [and] asked some of the same types of questions across all of them. We then started the process of beginning to collect these interviews, at first with the thought that we were looking at collecting these interviews, primarily from women, but we realized that to really understand the women’s stories we also had to balance those with the men’s stories. In addition we realized we wanted to balance according to continent, so we are attempting to gather interviews with people from Europe, from Asia, from Australia, from South America, from Africa as we can. Although the other continents outside [North America] are going must more slowly just because most people that are involved with the project are in the United States.

So in conducting such an interview, we sit down face-to-face; it’s an audio interview; it’s a very friendly thing. We create a transcription that goes onto the CEOHP website, which is simply ceohp.org. These interviews, once they are approved, are available for use, for example in the classroom. We are also striving to find ways that the interviews can be adapted and made [into] modules that can be used in educational situations. So it’s an exciting project, it’s expanding to include the men as well. The gender
comparison is very important. In addition, we have realized the importance of getting stories from people across their careers because the best mentor or role model is one that’s just a little bit ahead of where you are, so you can visualize yourself getting there. Since we really want to inspire young women in particular at the high school and college level, we are beginning to gather interviews with undergraduates, graduate students, people just starting their career after finishing a PhD, in order to understand and be able to compare the differences in all of those different situations.

PP: Sounds fascinating and I’m looking forward to listening to some of those interviews. I am sure they are very inspiring. Do you have some ideas on how a high school or even middle school teacher could use what’s available there in the classroom or in a club environment? How have you seen them being used, or how might you suggest they be used?

VA: At this point, we haven’t gotten very far in seeing them used because the project is really pretty young. We really only started gathering interviews in the beginning of 2006. And it takes time to have them adapted and made ready. The way I see them being used is helping with an appreciation of the history of the field, seeing that real people become computer science educators and have challenges along the way. Some of these stories are just amazing for the difficulties that a person faced and overcame as they were going along. So there is a good deal of inspiration. I think that using the stories to have children write essays about the kinds of things that happened to a person, to compare and contrast. There are going to be supplemental materials so that there is more of an historical perspective on what the different developments were over time, the kind of curricula and assignments and other things that may have been given by this person as a teacher, so that at this point there is a strong sense of the differences and similarities in the lives of the people that we’ve been studying. I also see this moving in the direction of some organized materials, perhaps modules, that we can recommend for use. NCWIT has the concept of a Program-in-a-Box and so we can imagine packaging different approaches to using these materials so that a high school teacher or a middle school teacher could easily make use of the materials in their classroom for whatever the unit happened to be that they were going to be teaching, with recommendations and, where we can, connections to some of the curricular guidelines that may need to be followed, just to help inspire. It could be useful in a science class, in a gender studies class, in a sociology class, in a lot of different contexts, I believe. So we’re looking both for people who are interested to start looking at it, as well as ideas for how we can use it, because I am sure there are lots of ways that high school teachers can imagine that we haven’t yet come up with.

PP: So, who are some of these individuals that you have interviewed?

VA: We have interviewed one of my mentors, Nell Dale. She was a senior lecturer at The University of Texas at Austin for a lot of years. She was co-supervisor of my doctoral work, and she has been very active in computer science education over the last two and a half, three decades. She is one of the leading textbook writers of introductory texts in computer science, so a lot of high school teachers will recognize her name.
because of her work in authorship. She is just an amazing person, just charming and witty, and the type of person you are proud to call a friend. [She] served as SIGCSE chair for a number of years, so she really has had great inroads in the field.

One of the younger people that we have interviewed is Graciela Pereira. She is a new professor at a University in Ohio and was born and raised in Venezuela. In her interview she talks about the influences of growing up in the family system that she was part of and the way that she found her way through her educational path and ended up deciding that in spite of the strong influences of the Catholic culture that she came from that she wasn’t going to get married to someone that she really knew she shouldn’t be married to, that she was going to pursue her degree, that she was going to go and teach and fulfill this dream that she had of making science alive for other people.

So that is sort of two ends of the spectrum, but gives an example of the kinds of stories we have.

PP: Well, it sounds very intriguing and I’m really looking forward to listening to them myself. Give us the name of that website again, please.

VA: The website is www.ceohp.org, CEOHP dot org.

PP: Thank you very much and good luck with gathering more.