Computing Educators Oral History Project

Practice interview transcript

Vicki Almstrum

Interviewer: Mary Last
Recorded Wednesday, March 1, 2006
Location: Houston, Texas

Corresponding audio available on CEOHP’s website, ceohp.org, under “Short Practice Interviews”.

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We recommend that this transcript be cited as follows:


Conducted during the training session at the 2006 SIGCSE Technical Symposium.

[0:00]

Mary Last: This is an interview with Vicki Almstrum from University of Texas at Austin, conducted by Mary Last. This interview is being recorded on March 1st, 2006, at Houston, Texas. It is part of the Computing Education Oral History Series. Did we pronounce your name right -- did I pronounce it right?

Vicki Almstrum: Almstrum.

M: You've had some interesting mentors in your life and you've had some interesting friendships with people who are giants in the field -- Edsger Dijkstra. And I know I'm not saying that right. So how do you say that?

V: Edsger W. Dijkstra -- Dijkstra.

M: Could you speak about how he influenced your life as a mentor or in teaching?
It's interesting. I'll get tearful because I think back to when I first started at UT and not wanting to take his class because I thought, "I'm not worthy!" And then finally getting the courage to take it and being so happy and so comfortable. Because he always had small classes, no more than about 18 students, and they were so personal. He always started class with a quote, just something odd and interesting and I always kept in my notes all of the different quotes that he had over the years. And in one of the booklets we put together to honor him, several of us collected some of our favorites of those.

I'll never forget one time, a particularly interesting theorem that he put up, and he asked always for different approaches. And I came up with an approach that was different. And he usually had no sandals on. He would be in his stocking feet and shorts and his bolo tie. He would pace back and forth and rub his goatee and think and so he stopped and thought about this one and says, "I've never thought of that; that's really interesting." And just sort of a feeling of pride. It was incredible.

And just being touched over the years that he would come and talk to my software engineering classes. He did one of his EWDs, answering questions that my students had given. And so it's neat to have that as part of his legacy.

Being invited to private celebrations of his birthday, then, after getting to know him after a few years was very touching. And in fact one of the things I am missing this weekend by being here in Houston is getting to see his wife when she is going to be in Austin over the weekend.

So it just ... it was an amazing experience, both to see him in action teaching, to be part of his Tuesday Afternoon Club, and be sitting ...

M: {interrupts} What's Tuesday afternoon?

V: Tuesday Afternoon Club he started in Eindhoven and so Eindhoven continued with this.

M: {interrupts} What's Eindhoven?

V: Eindhoven is in the Netherlands. This is the University he was at. So just a little background about Edsger is that he was very discouraged in his years at Eindhoven because he was such a visionary and he was in a department of mathematicians. And the things that he was talking about -- computing, "it's just going to go away", "it's nothing interesting" -- and so he felt very alone, very isolated. So in the late 1960s, as some of the activities started with the software engineering conferences in Germany and in Rome in 1968 and 1969 and beginning to build his collection of colleagues and friends, he went through a horrible depression and brought himself out of it in part by writing his treatise on structured programming. And to understand the process that he had gone through and to appreciate all of that was amazing.

So in Eindhoven, in order to build his support structure, he started his Tuesday Afternoon Club. And it was Tuesday afternoons, hence the reason for the name. And they would read articles together. And I don't mean just "you read an article and come and discuss it". I mean...
you read line-by-line-by-line through the article. And so he continued this into Austin and I
was invited to join in. Walt Potter from Southwestern often participated, graduate students,
some faculty members. And it would be a little bit of social, a lot of looking at these articles
carefully and just on a row-by-row-by-row basis, talking about the ideas, the language that
was used to express it, the word choices, looking at the theorems, looking at the proofs.
Following through them, every line, in order to say, "OK, is the logic here? Does it have the
elegance it should?" These are important themes that would come back time after time.

M: And they influenced you?

V: Yes.

[5:28]