

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 practice interviews.

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Conducted during the training session at 2006 SIGCSE Technical Symposium.

1 [0:00]

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

6
7 Vicki Almstrum: Almstrum.

8
9 **M: You've had some interesting mentors in your life and you've had some interesting**
10 **friendships with people who are giants in the field -- Edsger Dijkstra. And I know I'm**
11 **not saying that right. So how do you say that?**

12
13 V: Edsger W. Dijkstra -- Dijkstra.

14
15 **M: Could you speak about how he influenced your life as a mentor or in teaching?**

16

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

24

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

31

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

35

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

40

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

43

44 **M: {interrupts} What's Tuesday afternoon?**

45

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

47

48 **M: {interrupts} What's Eindhoven?**

49

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

59

60 So in Eindhoven, in order to build his support structure, he started his Tuesday Afternoon
61 Club. And it was Tuesday afternoons, hence the reason for the name. And they would read
62 articles together. And I don't mean just "you read an article and come and discuss it". I mean

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63 you read line-by-line-by-line through the article. And so he continued this into Austin and I
64 was invited to join in. Walt Potter from Southwestern often participated, graduate students,
65 some faculty members. And it would be a little bit of social, a lot of looking at these articles
66 carefully and just on a row-by-row-by-row basis, talking about the ideas, the language that
67 was used to express it, the word choices, looking at the theorems, looking at the proofs.
68 Following through them, every line, in order to say, "OK, is the logic here? Does it have the
69 elegance it should?" These are important themes that would come back time after time.

70

71 **M: And they influenced you?**

72

73 V: Yes.

74 [5:28]