Alison Young: This is an interview with Mary Last from Mary Hardin-Baylor University conducted by Alison Young. This interview is being recorded on the 5th of March, 2006 in Houston [Texas], USA.

Did I pronounce your name correctly, Mary?

Mary Z. Last: Yes.

AY: Mary, I note from your C.V. that your first degree was in chemistry. Can you tell us a little bit about that and then what led you from chemistry into computer science?

MZL: Well, I started out to be a physician when I went to college. And I had wanted to be a physician ever since I can remember wanting to be something. Because my mother is a physician. And so when I went to college, she absolutely told me she did not want me to take pre-med because pre-med never prepared you for anything, so that if something happened and I didn’t go to medical school I should have a degree in a discipline. So chemistry was the discipline because my father was a chemist. So I chose chemistry as my major, because … with full intentions of going to medical school.
And things happened and I didn’t go to medical school because I did typical things that girls do sometimes when they are in college. They fall in love. And they decide they want to get married. And they don’t want to go to school after they get out of college. And you learn better when you’re older. But …

So when I had that degree in chemistry, towards the end, I thought about teaching; thought about teaching at secondary. And then, DuPont interviewed, E. I. DuPont interviewed at school. And they interviewed for people with chemistry degrees, but they weren’t going to work in a lab, which was very interesting to me because I didn’t like lab work. I just … I didn’t like lab work and my senior project, I had developed an allergic reaction to the chemicals that I was working with, so I had a hard time finishing my senior project. And the job at DuPont was using computers to index and abstract chemical patents. So it was chemical information systems. And this was back in 1967, at the very beginning. DuPont had this chemical information system that they had developed — very sophisticated system — still, when I think about it, it was really very sophisticated. So, I was offered job doing chemical indexing, abstracting and indexing.

AY: You actually worked in the computing industry as … although you had you degree in chemistry, you worked in the computing industry?

MZL: Mmm hmm.

AY: … and that’s what led to your interest in …

MZL: Yep.

AY: … computer science. Can you tell us more about what you did in your job in industry?

MZL: My job in industry, I was … As I said, I developed systems. I developed ways to categorize chemical reactions and name chemicals so that you could record it into a computerized system and be able to retrieve that — to do searching. So, I was writing systems, if you will, to determine whether a chemical was being used in a reaction as a reagent, or whether it was the product of some reaction. So doing those types of things. And I actually was published as a chemist, because my first two professional publications were in chemical journals. And it was developing information systems, computerized information systems, that would keep track of chemicals.

AY: Did they give you any formal training or did you learn …

MZL: We had some training in the beginning. And it was something that I really enjoyed. And I got to be fairly good at it because I managed to get some promotions and then about five years after I started working at DuPont — this system that DuPont had was very expensive and they were paying for it in-house — and they offered it for sale to information companies. And the company … one of the companies that bought it was Information for Industry [IFI] and they had been publishing journals and things like that. And as part of the “deal”, DuPont said that they would allow several people to go to IFI to start it up. And there were five of us and I was one of the five that was asked to go with IFI. And this is normal for DuPont. If you have ever worn Gore-Tex or anything like that, W. L. Gore worked for DuPont and it was a product DuPont didn’t want to pursue, so they told Gore, “If you want to start a company, we’ll help you.” And that’s exactly how Gore-Tex got started. And so …

AY: So, you went to the new company and developed more systems?
MZL: Mmm hmm. Developed more systems. We were one of the first ones to develop on-line databases when Dialog … Dialog Information Services in the early 1970s. We developed a lot of databases, on-line databases, for Dialog — we were available. We did … started out with chemical patents and then we branched out into career placement. We had the very, very first career placement registry service on-line, so …

AY: So with all this background in computing and developing systems, what led you into education?

MZL: Well, when I was working for IFI, I did a lot of training. I did a lot of training. I did a lot of training … corporate training. I traveled a lot. And everybody in my family is in education, some way or another. And so it kind of … I don’t know whether it’s in the genes or what. But I did a lot of training and I really … I liked to train. And I had an opportunity — circumstances allowed me, I guess, the opportunity to get into education to see whether I would like it and I loved it.

AY: And so what led you into the university sector as opposed to training in industry?

MZL: What happened was, I actually was doing training when I left the company. My husband was transferred, so we moved to Georgia. And I was doing some training down there and I applied for a job at a community college — it wasn’t a community college, it was a junior college. And it was very interesting because when they asked me if I could teach certain courses, I said “Oh no, I don’t think I could teach that.” And so I never got another interview. And I went back to working with the computer things, I was working as a consultant and doing some traveling. And about two years later, somebody that I worked with in a volunteer situation said, “I think you would be wonderful teaching at the junior college.” And I said, “Well, I don’t know.” And they said, “Well, I know the Provost and I told him I think you would be great. Send your resume.” So I sent my resume and I was interviewed by the same person that had interviewed me two years before, who didn’t remember me. And he said, “Could you teach so and so?” And I said, “Oh yes, I can teach that.” So, I learned my lesson. So, like every other teacher, when you’re told you are going to teach something, you learn it first and then you teach it.

AY: And you were able to teach it?

MZL: Yes. You know, I gave it my best shot.

AY: Thank you, Mary!

[7:42]