Computing Educators Oral History Project
Training interview transcript
Mary Z. Last
Interviewer: Alison Young
Recorded Sunday, March 5, 2006
Location: Houston, TX

Corresponding audio available on CEOHP's website, ceohp.org, under training.

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

1 [0:00]
2 **Alison Young: This is an interview with Mary Last from Mary Hardin-Baylor University conducted by**
3 **Alison Young. This interview is being recorded on the 5th of March, 2006 in Houston [Texas], USA.**
4
5 **Did I pronounce your name correctly, Mary?**
6
7 Mary Z. Last: Yes.
8
9 **AY: Mary, I note from your C.V. that your first degree was in chemistry. Can you tell us a little bit about**
10 **that and then what led you from chemistry into computer science?**
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12 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
13   can remember wanting to be something. Because my mother is a physician. And so when I went to college,
14   she absolutely told me she did not want me to take pre-med because pre-med never prepared you for
15   anything, so that if something happened and I didn't go to medical school I should have a degree in a
16   discipline. So chemistry was the discipline because my father was a chemist. So I chose chemistry as my
17   major, because … with full intentions of going to medical school.
18

19   And things happened and I didn't go to medical school because I did typical things that girls do sometimes
20   when they are in college. They fall in love. And they decide they want to get married. And they don't want
21   to go to school after they get out of college. And you learn better when you're older. But …
22
23   So when I had that degree in chemistry, towards the end, I thought about teaching; thought about teaching at
24   secondary. And then, DuPont interviewed, E. I. DuPont interviewed at school. And they interviewed for
25   people with chemistry degrees, but they weren't going to work in a lab, which was very interesting to me
26   because I didn't like lab work. I just … I didn't like lab work and my senior project, I had developed an
27   allergic reaction to the chemicals that I was working with, so I had a hard time finishing my senior project.
28   And the job at DuPont was using computers to index and abstract chemical patents. So it was chemical
29   information systems. And this was back in 1967, at the very beginning. DuPont had this chemical
30   information system that they had developed — very sophisticated system — still, when I think about it, it
31   was really very sophisticated. So, I was offered job doing chemical indexing, abstracting and indexing.
32
33 **AY: You actually worked in the computing industry as … although you had you degree in chemistry, you**
34   **worked in the computing industry?**
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36 MZL: Mmm hmm.
37
38 **AY: … and that's what led to your interest in …**
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40 MZL: Yep.
41
42 **AY: … computer science. Can you tell us more about what you did in your job in industry?**
43
44 MZL: My job in industry, I was … As I said, I developed systems. I developed ways to categorize chemical
45   reactions and name chemicals so that you could record it into a computerized system and be able to retrieve
46   that — to do searching. So, I was writing systems, if you will, to determine whether a chemical was being
47   used in a reaction as a reagent, or whether it was the product of some reaction. So doing those types of
48   things. And I actually was published as a chemist, because my first two professional publications were in
49   chemical journals. And it was developing information systems, computerized information systems, that
50   would keep track of chemicals.
51
52 **AY: Did they give you any formal training or did you learn …**
53
54 MZL: We had some training in the beginning. And it was something that I really enjoyed. And I got to be fairly
55   good at it because I managed to get some promotions and then about five years after I started working at
56   DuPont — this system that DuPont had was very expensive and they were paying for it in-house — and they
57   offered it for sale to information companies. And the company … one of the companies that bought it was
58   Information for Industry [IFI] and they had been publishing journals and things like that. And as part of the
59   "deal", DuPont said that they would allow several people to go to IFI to start it up. And there were five of us
60   and I was one of the five that was asked to go with IFI. And this is normal for DuPont. If you have ever
61   worn Gore-Tex or anything like that, W. L. Gore worked for DuPont and it was a product DuPont didn't
62   want to pursue, so they told Gore, "If you want to start a company, we'll help you." And that's exactly how
63   Gore-Tex got started. And so …
64 [5:01]
65 **AY: So, you went to the new company and developed more systems?**
66

67   MZL: Mmm hmm. Developed more systems. We were one of the first ones to develop on-line databases when
68   Dialog … Dialog Information Services in the early 1970s. We developed a lot of databases, on-line
69   databases, for Dialog — we were available. We did … started out with chemical patents and then we
70   branched out into career placement. We had the very, very first career placement registry service on-line, so
71   …
72

73   AY: **So with all this background in computing and developing systems, what led you into education?**
74

75   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 …
76   corporate training. I traveled a lot. And everybody in my family is in education, some way or another. And
77   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
78   liked to train. And I had an opportunity — circumstances allowed me, I guess, the opportunity to get into
79   education to see whether I would like it and I loved it.
80

81   AY: **And so what led you into the university sector as opposed to training in industry?**
82

83   MZL: What happened was, I actually was doing training when I left the company. My husband was transferred, so
84   we moved to Georgia. And I was doing some training down there and I applied for a job at a community
85   college — it wasn't a community college, it was a junior college. And it was very interesting because when
86   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
87   got another interview. And I went back to working with the computer things, I was working as a consultant
88   and doing some traveling. And about two years later, somebody that I worked with in a volunteer situation
89   said, "I think you would be wonderful teaching at the junior college." And I said, "Well, I don't know." And
90   they said, "Well, I know the Provost and I told him I think you would be great. Send your resume." So I sent
91   my resume and I was interviewed by the same person that had interviewed me two years before, who didn't
92   remember me. And he said, "Could you teach so and so?" And I said, "Oh yes, I can teach that." So, I
93   learned my lesson. So, like every other teacher, when you're told you are going to teach something. you
94   learn it first and then you teach it.
95

96   AY: **And you were able to teach it?**
97

98   MZL: Yes. You know, I gave it my best shot.
99

100 AY: **Thank you, Mary!**
101 [7:42]