

Computing Educators Oral History Project
Training interview transcript

Barbara Boucher Owens

Interviewer: William Aspray

Recorded Saturday, June 25, 2005

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

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

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Conducted during the training session the ITiCSE 2005 Working Group meeting.

- 1 **[0:00]**
2 **William Aspray: So this is an interview on the 25th of June, 2005, with Barbara Boucher [pronouncing it**
3 **“Boo-shay”] Owens. Did I say your name right?**
4
5 Barbara Boucher Owens: No.
6
7 WA: Would you tell me how it's spelled ... said?
8
9 **BBO: Said? “Bow-cher”.**
10
11 **WA: “Bow-cher”. OK. The interviewer — William Aspray.**
12
13 **Let's begin by having you talk a bit about your early life. What did your parents do?**
14
15 BBO: My dad was a dentist and my mother was a housewife, but had a Master's degree in business administration.
16
17 **WA: And were there brothers and sisters?**
18
19 BBO: I had an older brother.
20
21 **WA: And did your parents, either or both of them, encourage you to take courses in math and science?**

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22
23 BBO: I think they did. I mean, my mother especially, but both parents did.
24
25 **WA: And did they also encourage your brother to do so?**
26
27 BBO: I think so.
28
29 **WA: OK. And were you a good student?**
30
31 BBO: Mmm hmm. A very good student.
32
33 **WA: A very good student. Did you take courses in math and science disciplines, as well as in the other fields?**
34
35 BBO: Well, in high school, I had ... the football coach was a mentor who, in general science, said you can go
36 anywhere you want to go with science, and tutored me on the side. I'd had terrible science teachers in high
37 school. And I took advanced chemistry in college and I felt totally lost. So I didn't take any more science in
38 college. And in math, they did the switch from the old calculus to what we have now, they call college
39 algebra, the pre-calc course. And they called it calculus I, because I was on the semester that they started it, so
40 I couldn't take calculus II. So I never took calculus again until after I got out of school.
41
42 **WA: It seems sort of odd that the football coach would be a mentor for you. How did that happen?**
43
44 BBO: He was ... well, coaches have to teach something besides coach, and he taught general science.
45
46 **WA: I see. So he was your general science teacher. OK. And how did you ... did you know from early on**
47 **that you wanted to go to college?**
48
49 BBO: I don't think it was a "know". I think it was just expected in our family.
50
51 **WA: Expected. Your parents both had degrees, right?**
52
53 BBO: And my grandfather was also a dentist. My grandmother ... other grandmother was a teacher. Great
54 educations.
55
56 **WA: And how did you choose where to go to college?**
57
58 BBO: My mother. My father. My aunt. My cousin. My brother—all had gone to this college. And I went.
59
60 **WA: And did you feel some ... did you feel good about this?**
61
62 BBO: I don't know. Probably not. Probably the least ... it was easiest.
63
64 **WA: It was easiest. Why did ... how did you choose your major?**
65
66 BBO: Because of a mentor. I majored in psychology. And it was probably because a mentor chose me. The teacher
67 in my introductory college psych course took an interest in me. And I ended up being his baby sitter and his
68 research assistant and the person that I had my daughter stay with when she went to look at colleges.
69
70 **WA: Did you consider any other majors?**
71
72 BBO: No. It just happened that it was the easiest thing to do because, I think, of that interest.
73
74 **WA: So you mentioned a little bit about your mathematics courses in college, and lack of them. But what**
75 **about your other science courses, what ...?**
76

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77 BBO: Well, I mentioned the chemistry, that was all I took. That was it. One semester of calculus and one semester
78 of chemistry. I was in experimental psychology, however, and so I took physiology. I was the lab manager, so
79 I wired plug boards. I was very interested in statistics in psychology, so that I had lots of statistics in graduate
80 school. I really loved math.

81
82 **WA: And what was your expectation of what you were going to do with this degree when you graduated?**

83
84 BBO: I had no clue and had met somebody from the University of Texas at a conference, who suggested I go to
85 graduate school there in psychology. And I thought, "Well, maybe I ought to find a job!" So I applied for a
86 few jobs and got an offer to be the head of the Campfire Girls in the offices in Ponca City, Oklahoma.
87 [chuckles] Chose to go to graduate school at UT.

88
89 **WA: I see. And how did you choose to go there? Because of this contact?**

90
91 BBO: No, because I had a boyfriend from Ohio Wesleyan who was in the Air Force in Texas. And so it was a way
92 to be close to him.

93 [5:00]

94 **WA: So were there other formative influences on you during your college or your Master's program? People
95 or courses you took that were particularly important.**

96
97 BBO: In a way, I think what ... there were two things that happened in graduate school that led me into computer
98 science. And one was my thesis advisor in human learning had written a programmed instruction text —
99 which was ... you have a sentence and cover up the answer and slip down the page — in statistics. And he
100 had physically had somebody change it into a computer-assisted instruction program and I was the debugger
101 for that program. It was the first time I'd seen a computer being used for anything that I would be remotely
102 interested in. And then I saw how it would relate to everything that I had been doing in experimental
103 psychology and in statistics and everything fell together. "I want to play with computers. I REALLY want to
104 play with computers!" And so I got out of graduate school. I had the ... that wasn't answering that question.
105 But that's ...

106
107 So when I was almost through with my graduate program, I didn't know what I wanted to do again. (Sounds
108 like a constant theme in my life — I'm not sure what I want to do!) My mother thought that since I'd had
109 some experience with computers, that I ought to be a programmer — because "every good girl should be a
110 programmer" (those were exactly her words!) She cut out an ad for IBM, out of the newspaper, and said, "Go
111 for that interview!" And I had been offered a fellowship to continue in psychology, with admission in the
112 doctoral program. And I went to this IBM interview. And IBM offered ... I told them I didn't want
113 programming. I wanted to use computers, but I did not want programming. And I got an offer from IBM to
114 work in computer-assisted instruction at the IBM Research Lab. And I thought, "Boy, that's great!"

115
116 **WA: Mmm hmm. So what did you do there?**

117
118 BBO: One of the major things I did there was manage some programs where we had computer terminals in maybe
119 15 different colleges in New York State. And it was in German, French, and maybe a little bit of Vietnamese.
120 And then when I left Research, I worked for — I don't remember the name of the division of IBM, but we did
121 Russian for the Defense Language Institute. So I managed those programs, did some of the debugging of the
122 programs, did a little bit of statistical analysis on the data from those programs.

123
124 **WA: What did you like and dislike about these jobs at IBM?**

125
126 BBO: It was ... I liked the research, because we could work on what we were supposed to until 3:00. And after 3:00
127 we could work on whatever we would like. Which was just a wonderful atmosphere to be in. And after that
128 we could work on what we wanted. I liked playing bridge at noon. I liked the hiking club at night. So there
129 was a whole social cadre of young, bright scientists mapped my life. So I really liked working for IBM.

130
131 I had to leave IBM because the day that ... I was married, that's another story. Does that get told about IBM
132 ...

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WA: We'll come back to that! We'll come back to that in a minute.

BBO: OK. So I lost my train, could you bring it back?

WA: Things you liked and disliked about the job.

BBO: I disliked a boss who would take my ideas and say they were terrible. And then read a paper that he had written where he'd used my ideas and got the credit for it.

WA: Did you feel like your education prepared you well to do this work?

BBO: Well, there were no preparations for any kind of computer work when I was young. It certainly didn't train me, but the liberal arts background prepares you to do just about anything. So in that case sure.

WA: And were there other women doing the kinds of work that you were doing?

BBO: Yes. And, in fact, in retrospect it was mostly women. Management was mostly male. But the women I worked with ... mostly women.

[9:56]

WA: And was that a point of interest or note or ...?

BBO: I never thought about it until this minute.

WA: Until this minute?

BBO: Until this minute.

WA: Oh, that's very interesting.

OK, so let's come back and talk about this issue of IBM and marriage for women.

BBO: At the time that I worked for IBM ... my husband and I had planned to get married. We met at IBM and his group was being transferred to California. And so I agreed to go along with him and look for a job within IBM. But IBM would not send me to California with him because we weren't married and that would be moral turpitude. So I had to interview people meeting half-way across the country. They were willing to fly people to ... I guess it was Kansas City. And I met the people in Kansas City that I interviewed with for my job. That was number one.

Then later, when my husband decided he wanted to go back to graduate school in computer science at NYU. And he found out that he was accepted at NYU the same day I had a positive pregnancy test. We had agreed on a five-year plan. I was responsible for five years for the economic viability of the family and then the other ... he could do what he wanted for five years and then we'd switch. And I was in my five years of economic responsibility when I found out I was pregnant. And IBM said you can't work past the seventh month because it's unseemly to have pregnant women.

So that switched me into education. And a friend from IBM said, "Well, Brooklyn College is hiring and in the psychology department". And they offered me a job teaching computer simulation of human behavior, which was a real map to what I was interested in, and a statistics class. So that was great. And the next year they formed the computer science department. And in those days, if you could program a computer to do anything, you could teach computer science. So I became ... came in on the ground floor of the computer science department and have not stopped teaching computer science since then.

WA: And had you thought about a career as a faculty member?

BBO: Had I prior to that?

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189
190 **WA: Mmm hmm.**
191
192 BBO: Never.
193
194 **WA: Never. And what was your experience teaching?**
195
196 BBO: I loved it. I loved it. I loved the students. I liked the individual students that I could do research with. I liked
197 big classroom teaching. I liked ... teaching.
198
199 **WA: Were there other women at Brooklyn College on the faculty in computing?**
200
201 BBO: There were a few. But at one point in time I was the only non-rabbi in the department, so there were a lot of
202 males.
203
204 **WA: Mmm hmm.**
205
206 BBO: And except for the department chair. He was not a rabbi, but the rest of the department was. So it was very
207 interesting finding about being that female for them and for me.
208
209 **WA: So looking at your resume, I see that you taught there for seven years. Six years.**
210
211 BBO: Mmm hmm.
212
213 **WA: So then why did you change?**
214
215 BBO: Again, my five years were up. My husband had a job at IBM Research and I had the choice of staying on —
216 I'd gotten my Ph.D. at that time — and I could stay on at Brooklyn. Or I hadn't ... they hadn't made the
217 appointment for the year. It was kind of whether ... I had to have the Ph.D. to be re-appointed in the tenure
218 track that year. And I could get the job at Brooklyn if I wanted it, but my husband was in Westchester. And I
219 had started the commute to go up ... he had started to commute, couldn't take the commute, so he moved to
220 Westchester. I had the child at home. And then I couldn't handle the job — I was just finishing my Ph.D. and
221 the kid. And so, somehow, it turned out that I didn't take the job at Brooklyn. I stayed in our little town of
222 Peekskill and substitute taught for a year in high school. I learned a lot!
223
224 **WA: [laughing]**
225
226 BB: I didn't want to do high school teaching. It was too hard. Especially because I had a Ph.D., so I could teach
227 anything. So I taught biology, English, physical education. When I did get a math section, a fellow had had a
228 heart attack and I got to take over his class for six weeks, so I taught them programming, that was a lot of fun.
229 But that was the hardest job I've ever had.
230
231 **WA: Let's go back for a minute and talk about your Ph.D. education.**
232 [15:00]
233 BBO: Mmm hmm.
234
235 **WA: What did you do and why did you go where you went and what were your experiences like?**
236
237 BBO: This is beginning to sound like a broken record, with the "least resistance" method of going through life! I
238 had started taking courses at NYU because I was teaching one class at the graduate center of CUNY in
239 computer applications to education. And met a guy at NYU and we were talking, we'd met at a professional
240 meeting, and he was teaching some interesting courses, so I said, "Let me take a few." So I started taking
241 courses. And I just ... all of a sudden, he said to me, "Barbara, you're half-way through our program! Why
242 don't you enroll *really*?" I said, "OK!" And so, since I was already almost ... more than half-way done with
243 my coursework, I finished my Ph.D. And it was in a relatively new and didn't-last-long program called
244 "Computer Applications to Education". It was in the Communications in Education Department. But it was

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245 cross-curricular: I had somebody from computer science, somebody from ed psych, and somebody from the
246 Ed Department. It was a truly active committee for working on my dissertation. I had a lot of fun. I got a
247 Ph.D. for having fun. And the only thing that wasn't fun was the end of the dissertation.
248

249 **WA: And how was it balancing all these other duties: teaching, having a family ...**

250
251 BBO: Oh, except for the separation time, it was ... it worked extraordinarily well. My husband took a lot of night
252 classes, so he was home from school and I was teaching. And we were ... it was kind of transparent, we had
253 very little ... In those days, it wasn't ... childcare wasn't much of an issue, because there were so many
254 people that didn't work. I had a next door neighbor that was a very good friend, and we could just ... I could
255 just leave the baby with her. And it was not a difficult thing.
256

257 It got a little more difficult with two children. After we moved together from Westchester and we were
258 teaching at the next place, at Mercy, but not much, because I taught a lot of night classes. And they were at
259 nursery school and it was a very flexible schedule. So it was the best of all worlds. Our whole babysitting
260 pool was there. I didn't have to arrange childcare. So that I look at my colleagues who are younger and their
261 struggle with children and arranging daycare and not having a whole support system of mostly stay-at-home
262 moms. It's a different world. It's harder.
263

264 **WA: Were there other women in your graduate program? In this doctoral program?**

265
266 BBO: I was not friends with really anybody in the graduate program. Which is unusual when I look around at other
267 ...
268

269 **WA: What about in your classes?**

270
271 BBO: There were women and there were quite a few women, mainly because it was housed in Communications.
272 My advisor was the gentlest geek in the world. He put together one of the first Altair kits at the same time he
273 was building a perfectly green house outside of Trenton, New Jersey, and his son was living in a yurt. So it
274 was kind of technology and non-technology married to the program. So it was mostly my hanging out with
275 my advisor as my ...
276

277 **WA: And what did you choose to study in your doctoral work?**

278
279 BBO: I was teaching programming in BASIC and seeing how students were always hitting a wall. And had read
280 some work by Mayer in which students were ... couldn't understand IF-statements. I realized that that was
281 blocking a lot of people. So I did a — and I was interested in how people learn and formulate ideas — so I
282 did a learning styles experiment in teaching the programming language BASIC based on Mayer's work. And
283 it was fun. I mean, it was just ... they gave me a degree for having fun!
284

285 **WA: So you finished your ... finishing up your degree. What were you going to do next?**

286
287 BBO: Well, I was going to stay doing what I was doing. Because I was teaching ... I was teaching — at the very
288 end, I was teaching at Mercy College.
289

290 **WA: Which is nearby where you lived.**

291
292 BBO: Yeah, when I moved to Westchester. I thought ... well, I really hadn't decided what I was going to do. I
293 knew I was going to teach, but I just didn't know where and when. And Mercy opened up a campus in my
294 little town, so I could walk there. So I started with two classes when the baby was little. And I ended up a
295 tenured, full professor a number of years later.
296

296 [20:01]

297 **WA: Mmm hmm. And what were the next set of things that changed in your life?**

298
299 BBO: Again, it wasn't my turn. And my husband wanted to go someplace warm. So he wanted to move to Texas.
300 And ... and that ... actually, there was a mentor in between. I did leave out something really important, that

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301 got me involved in the computer science ed community. And that was having met a woman, Doris Appleby.
302 Doris and I met at a meeting, had very similar interests; got roped into the very first Eastern Small College
303 Computer Conference steering committee — in 1984 or 1985. And got really involved in having venues for
304 people who were interested in computer science ed and were at small colleges, didn't have a family. And
305 Doris and I together bonded, and then became part of that group and bonded in that group. And then started a
306 greater New York small college community. And Doris just kind of mentored me through the process of
307 growing up in a profession.

308
309 And when I moved to Texas, I didn't have Doris anymore. But then my name sort of came up. And Nell
310 [Dale] involved me in the CS Ed community at the University of Texas when I was teaching in Austin.

311
312 **WA: I want take a break at this point, because I'm mindful of our time.**

313
314 BBO: OK.

315
316 **WA: So extending out of our interview and back into the regular [working] group. Should we continue this**
317 **or should we just stop with this as enough of an example?**

318
319 *Remote voice of working group member Lecia Barker: Well, I'd like to know how Barbara feels about that. Because*
320 *you mentioned earlier that XX, once you get going.*

321
322 **WA: Talk about XX**

323
324 *Remote voice of Lecia Barker continuing: So it probably feels like stopping in mid-stream ...*

325
326 **WA: Right. We are stopping in mid-stream, I mean ...**

327
328 BBO: Well, but for the group, there are two things. If we stop in mid-stream and this becomes a real interview, then
329 we can continue. I don't feel like I'm being shut down. I feel like enough of a rapport with Bill and his
330 question-asking technique that I would be comfortable to stop and start again if he really wanted to. Because
331 there are some issues about tenure and ... that are really very important, very traumatic, informative in the
332 way that I changed and how my career is at this point in my life.

333
334 **WA: My guess is that we are about half-way done ...**

335
336 BBO: So ...

337
338 **WA: ... is all.**

339
340 BBO: I don't mind ...

341
342 **WA: I'm just worried we are going to lose our afternoon.**

343
344 BBO: I think we should stop. And I think, if it's OK with you, that this can be a two-part interview.

345
346 **WA: That often happens. Someone has something to say, or it takes a long time to get into things, or**
347 **whatever, you often have to pick it up again and try to break in a nice place.**

348
349 BBO: And after lunch is a deadly time for the ones ... the people that are listening.

350 [23:12]

351 *[removed about 30 seconds of indistinct discussion too far removed from the microphone]*