Mimi Burbank

Mimi Burbank is a member of the *TUGboat* production team and past member of the TUG board.

[Interview completed 6 September 2005.]

Dave Walden, interviewer: Please tell me a bit about your personal history independent of TEX.

Mimi Burbank, interviewee: I'm 63 years old, was born and reared in Tennessee. During my junior and senior years in high school I worked in my best friend's parents' newspaper, and got a touch of "printers ink" in my blood. I then spent the next 25 years (or so) of my "working life" in the medical field. Then I moved to Florida and began working at Florida State University, mostly doing word processing for various faculty. Having done medical research and maintained medical records, I naturally was interested in the research going on.

I will be retiring at the end of October of 2005 and will be leaving shortly thereafter to go to Uganda. I will be taking TEX with me, and I plan on using it there as well.

DW: When and how did you first get involved with TEX and its friends?

MB: Well, in December of 1985 a group of scientists at the Supercomputer Computations Research Institute (SCRI) at Florida State University were interviewing candidates for a position of "word processor" which would require learning TEX. There were some five or six physicists using it. Well, I could spell the word "computer" but had never seen one. For personal reasons, I wanted to change departments, and I refused to think there was something that I couldn't learn to do; so I said, "Sure, I can learn that." Boy, what a shock. I was hired, and they gave me a computer ("What's that?") and *The TEXbook*. I spent the first three months of my job with that book in bed with me at night, under the pillow . . . it was my constant companion. Basically I spent most of my time in the index, learning the terms . . . and then reading from the front of the book as I learned.

I believe that at the end of the first week, I had learned enough to operate the computer and edit my first file — which was a brief "letter" and which still resides in my personnel folder where I currently work. I was so proud.

Then came mathematical papers. One scientist, an Eastern European, handed me pages and pages of a handwritten paper. I had more difficulty translating his handwriting than I did learning TEX. After about six months, I was given some equations, and there

were over 500 matching braces; perhaps it would be more accurate to say there were around 500 left braces but only 450 right braces. I then learned to indent and structure my code in such a way as to make it easy to edit later.

I attended my first annual TEX meeting in 1987, I think, and my first "Beginning TEX" course, taught by Stephan von Bechtholsheim (I eventually bought his complete set of TEX references). I met some wonderful people at the meeting — Barbara Beeton, Christina Thiele, and Blenda and Berthold Horn — and began corresponding with Christina and Barbara, and over the years have become fast friends with both.

DW: I'm interested in your experience in taking a *beginning* TEX course from a man whose book on TEX *practice* is four volumes and 1800 pages long.

MB: Stephan was (I hope, still is) an exuberant teacher of TEX. He had a great deal of experience and literally took the program apart at the seams to understand it. I still maintain that in order to understand LATEX, you need to understand the underlying "engine". My "basic" understanding came largely from his classes, and when I want to force LATEX to do something, I resort to his methods ;-). I like to know *why* something works the way it does . . . .

DW: Tell me more about your involvement with TUG.

MB: I originally became involved in the Conference Planning Committee, along with Christina, after co-editing the Dedham conference proceedings with Hope Hamilton in 1991, along with Dian De Sha. The experience, for all of us, sparked an attempt to write up our (ofttimes hilarious) experiences in an article we called "The Tale of 4 Witties". Unfortunately, we never finished it — but the file still exists and perhaps one day we will.

I became a member of the TUG Board in 1993, serving until 1997. During this time I also served on the Publications Committee and Conference Planning Committee (until the former died a natural death somewhere around 1997). I've edited or co-edited quite a few proceedings since 1992. I also organized the 1995 meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida. In 1996, at the annual meeting in Dubna, Russia, *TUGboat* was about two years behind in production and it was becoming evident that the job was just too much for one person — however diligent she was. Computer technology was advancing rapidly and the American Mathematical Society was changing architectures and causing all sorts of "access" problems for Barbara, so I undertook to get my site (SCRI) to become the home for a team of people who would work to produce *TUGboat*. In the first year I believe we published four issues, and we caught up with production by the end of the second year.

I'd have to say also that during this time, with the most gracious and expert help of Sebastian Rahtz, all of the machines at SCRI were used for development for the early years of the TEX Live CDs — another advantage of having a very diverse set of machines to play with. We currently have pretty much the same setup we developed in 1996 — that of one central "common" TEX path for all operating systems on the floor. Originally, we had two versions of IBM-AIX, three versions of IRIX, at least two versions of Solaris, one version of Linux, Windows, and two versions of Alphas (OSF) — it has been so long I can't remember how many different operating systems we've had. There were all sorts of problems with building the binaries — Sebastian probably got a lot of grey hairs over this; he always seemed to be on the computer even though he was six hours ahead of me. (Nowadays, Karl Berry is three hours behind me, but he too, always seems to be on the computer.)

Over the past ten years, my "home" has undergone some name changes, and changes in directors, but they have consistently provided access to various team members so that we could have a production site where people would be able to work to produce the

journal. I took a bit of the load off Barbara's shoulders, though. I've managed to archive all of the issues we produced and have made them available to the TUG office; and old archives reside on the TUG computer (`tug.org`) in Denmark.

Over the past ten years (or so) I've also served as one of the TUG "webmasters" — sharing the load there as well. It has always been one of the concerns of the production team to make as much information as possible about TeX available to the whole TeX community. Many people have worked on this, but I'd have to say that Sebastian deserves the lion's share of the applause ;-).

Overall, my webmaster duties take only a little time per week. My *TUGboat* duties have lessened over time as well — largely with the addition to the production team of Karl Berry, who has taught me much in the way of "makefiles" and `.cfg` files. At one point in time, I spent most of my day doing *TUGboat* editing and production; today, I primarily balance pages, fix bad breaks, overfull boxes, "eyeball" the output that goes to the printer and proof the bluelines when they return. We originally had to cut and paste some figures onto paper and mail hard copy to the printer. Today, everything is done using pdfLaTeX, ps2pdf, ConTeXt, and sometimes Acrobat Distiller — the world of publishing has certainly changed!

In general, my involvement in TUG has focused on two things: annual meetings, both organizing them, and editing and producing the proceedings, both as preprints and *TUGboat* issues; and publications: initially only editorial work on the proceedings issues of *TUGboat*, and then sliding sideways, as it were, more and more into *TUGboat* production work, to ensure that things printed correctly on paper, and then were presented correctly on-screen.

I'd have to add that one of my interests is to make publications and documentation available on the web.

DW: To what extent do you use TeX in your own work, as opposed to TUG's work?

MB: I've used LaTeX to publish several books at SCRI — always a learning experience. But I think my most memorable project was the initiation of the use of TeX for a database. In 1986–87 I was asked to provide some statistical information on publications for SCRI. It took forever to get the information, and I and my cohort, Donna Burnette, decided to write a database using TeX (after all, it was a pseudo-programming language wasn't it?) since our site would not pay to purchase a commercial database (at that time, they ran somewhere around $20,000). Well, in 1987 we began our database, and modified it over the next couple of years to produce many different types of reports — and users even used it to do their CVs for publications.... I don't believe it was until 1997–1998 that many of our users began using LaTeX. I had a difficult time making the transition myself, but once I converted, I was "hooked" ;-). One confession about the database, though — it was not Y2K compliant. In 2000, I had to completely rewrite the code ... but by then, we had changed names, and I needed to start a new database, so I heaved a sigh of relief. I hadn't written all of the original code, and it was rather cumbersome, but I managed to get it to work from 2000 to 2004 when we stopped using it altogether. The initial stages of the project were written up in the article "Using TeX for a Publications Database", *TUGboat* 13:3 (1992), pp. 362–371.

Somewhere around 1998 or so, a blind student came to work in the office with me using T.V. Raman's software, ASTER. (See T.V. Raman's article, "An Audio View of (LA)TeX Documents", in *TUGboat* 13:3 (1992).) This was a young man who had been blinded as an adult in an accident while in the Navy. He was studying astrophysics, and there was no application that suited his needs with regards to mathematics, so we purchased

ASTER and the necessary hardware. He left after one year, to pursue a Ph.D. program in Arizona.

Other than the above, I use LaTeX to do all of my own correspondence, and any documentation that I use. I've encouraged my children to use it (without much instruction), and I plan on taking it with me to Africa when I leave in November of this year.

DW: Let's move back to your involvement with *TUGboat* and various conference proceedings over the years. You must have worked with a lot of papers from many authors over the years. Are there some lessons learned there relevant to either the production staff or the authors?

MB: Working with authors has been a varied experience — quite! I have nightmares about some authors, and their quirks. I've never understood why an author would redefine a *TUGboat* macro to do something different than was originally intended. For several years, the biggest part of editing was going in and looking at the authors "stylistic" macros to see what conflicted.

I also have learned quite a lot from the actual production of the proceedings issues. In order to run many of these files, we actually had to *use* the software described. Often this led to conflicts with the basic *TUGboat* macros; sometimes we had to resort to chicanery in order to get something to print on paper and get it to the printer. Today, we send PDF files electronically — quite a long way from scissors and glue — but even now we sometimes have problems. Sometimes what will print on my printer will not print on the typesetter at the printing house. William Adams usually then goes in and performs some magic on the file, and we ship it off again.

DW: And what about the process of getting these documents actually printed and mailed to members? I suspect you have an interesting story or two to tell.

MB: This part of the process is actually the simplest. The procedures have been in place for a long time — when the printer is about ready to ship, the TUG office sends a file to them for the print run. Today this file is an Excel file, which is turned into a `.csv` file and mailed to the printer. We have archived this `.csv` file with each issue — for the past 10 years or so ... so that we have an accurate address for queries from members who did not receive their copy ....

DW: You mentioned going to Uganda after you retire and taking TeX with you to use there: I've heard from someone who knows you well that your first trip out of the US was to a TUG meeting.

MB: Christina Thiele and I attended the Aston meeting and then we spent a week driving around the entire country of Wales — drinking sparkling ales each evening in the pub, and staying at lovely Bed and Breakfast homes. I've got some seven or eight rolls of film on that. TUG has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to travel, something I never would have been able to afford had I not been on the TUG Board of Directors and highly involved in TUG affairs. My most memorable trip was to Russia in 1996. I made a longlasting friend there.

In fact, my involvement in TUG has enabled me to make many friends around the world — and I treasure each and every one of them. I am very grateful for my involvement in TUG, and encourage more people to become involved.

DW: Thank you very much for taking the time to do this interview. I have learned a number of things I didn't know about how parts of TUG operate. (And I'm envious of your opportunity to spend time in Uganda.)