

# Cheryl Ponchin and Susan DeMeritt

Cheryl Ponchin (left photo) and Susan DeMeritt (right photo) are both members of the TUG Board of Directors (Sue is secretary of the board), give workshops on  $\LaTeX$ , and use  $\TeX$  daily in their technical typing work.

[Interview completed 27 August 2007.]



*Dave Walden, interviewer:* Susan, please tell me a bit about your personal history independent of  $\TeX$ .

**Susan DeMeritt, interviewee:** I grew up in Lawrenceville, NJ (just outside of Princeton). I graduated from Lawrence High School in 1979. I went to Mercer County Community College and Trenton State College. In 1983, when I was 21 I joined the U.S. Navy, where I met my husband, Blair. We were both stationed on Treasure Island, San Francisco. We married in 1984 and our daughter, Katherine, was born in 1985. In July 1986, we transferred with the Navy to Japan. I was stationed at the U.S. Navy Fuel Depot in Tsurumi (near Yokohama). My husband was on the USS Reeves out of Yokosuka. In 1987, I got out of the Navy when our son, Mark, was born. In 1989, my father, who worked at IDA CCR Princeton (where Cheryl works) told me that a similar facility would be opening in San Diego, California. In 1989 my husband received orders to the USS O'Brien out of San Diego. In July 1989 we returned to the United States. I interviewed for the position of Technical Typist at IDA CCR La Jolla. I started in August 1989 and I am still here today. My family and I have lived in San Diego ever since.

*DW:* And Cheryl, please tell me a bit about your personal history independent of  $\TeX$ .

**Cheryl Ponchin, interviewee:** I also grew up in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. I graduated from Lawrence High School in 1978 and also graduated with an Associates degree in Secretarial Science from Mercer County Community College in 1980. I got married in 1982. My husband, Paul and I have two children, Rachel (23) and Matthew (21). My daughter is attending nursing school and my son is at West Virginia University studying business. I also work for IDA CCR, but in New Jersey.

Sue DeMeritt and I actually grew up around the corner from each other. I knew who Sue was, however, I was one year ahead of her in school and we didn't really hang out together. She started working at another IDA site in La Jolla, California. Sue had come to Princeton for me to show her how to use  $\TeX$ . We instantly became best of friends. It's funny what a small world we live in.

*DW:* Will each of you please tell me how you first became involved with  $\TeX$ .

**SD:** I first became involved with  $\TeX$  in 1989 when I started working at CCR La Jolla in August of 1989. In October, as Cheryl just mentioned, I was sent to CCR Princeton to learn  $\TeX$  from her. As she also mentioned, we were acquainted already—we grew up in the same neighborhood and went to all of the same schools. Once Cheryl started teaching me, we soon became fast friends. She is one of my closest friends.

**CP:** I started working for the Institute for Defense Analyses in Princeton, New Jersey in 1984. I was using a Lanier word processor to typeset math papers. In 1987 we started using  $\TeX$ . When I first started I just wanted my Lanier back. It seemed so much easier at the time.  $\TeX$  seemed frustrating when first using it. It didn't take long when I realized

the capabilities and really started to enjoy it. I have since trained many people at CCR. As she said, in 1989 Sue came to Princeton, and I was to show her how to use  $\text{\TeX}$ . We instantly became best of friends. I, along with Sue, have taught many workshops for TUG as well as doing workshops on my own at area colleges (i.e., Rutgers and Princeton).

*DW:* Cheryl, at that time did you regularly teach new employees to use  $\text{\TeX}$ , or was Sue a first?

*CP:* I taught one person at IDA CCR in Princeton before Sue and several people after Sue.

*DW:* Did you have or were you developing a theory of or syllabus for teaching  $\text{\TeX}$ ?

*CP:* I did not actually have a syllabus. Since I had not been using  $\text{\TeX}$  all that long, I just started teaching by putting together a simple document. After that was accomplished we started adding different things that  $\text{\TeX}$  could do.

*DW:* Sue, how did you feel about  $\text{\TeX}$  as you learned it?

*SD:* When I first learned  $\text{\TeX}$ , I was very overwhelmed. I was given a hard copy paper that needed to go into  $\text{\TeX}$ . With Cheryl's guidance, I was able to complete the paper. I have been learning ever since.

*DW:* Did you then teach new  $\text{\TeX}$  users at your office rather than them continuing to go to New Jersey for instruction from Cheryl?

*SD:* I was hired as the  $\text{\TeX}$  person at our facility. I was the only one who went back to Princeton to train with Cheryl. I continually help others here at CCR La Jolla with their  $\text{\LaTeX}$  problems.

*DW:* Cheryl, you mentioned that in addition to the TUG workshops, you have also taught non-TUG workshops in your region? Did the latter start before or after the TUG workshops?

*CP:* The non-TUG workshops started after doing the TUG workshops. People that attended the workshop for TUG suggested that I do a similar workshop for the employees that were not able to attend the TUG workshop.

*DW:* Are the other people that you teach or help other technical typists or the people actually doing the technical work or both?

*CP:* Outside of my main job I have taught support staff people who are typing for someone else as well as students who will be using it for their own work. At my main job, I have taught support staff people and also help the technical staff with their  $\text{\LaTeX}$  problems to complete their work.

*SD:* The majority of the people I help are mathematicians writing papers. Some of them are just learning  $\text{\TeX}$  for the first time and others have used it much more but are having problems getting things to work.

In the classes that Cheryl and I teach, there is a variety of people, i.e., mathematicians, people working for publishers, and people from other scientific companies.

*DW:* Does  $\text{\TeX}$  dominate your technical typing or are there other typesetting and word processing programs you use?

*CP:*  $\text{\LaTeX}$  dominates my main job. However, I do a lot of HTML work and create shell scripting programs for the tasks that I need that help ease the final steps of our  $\text{\LaTeX}$  papers. Besides using  $\text{\LaTeX}$  picture and other graphic  $\text{\TeX}$  programs we use FrameMaker

to create some graphics and convert them to postscript. We strictly use  $\LaTeX 2_{\epsilon}$  now. Any papers we get in other forms need to be converted to  $\LaTeX 2_{\epsilon}$ .

**SD:** When I say  $\TeX$ , I mean  $\LaTeX 2_{\epsilon}$ .  $\TeX$  definitely is the majority of my job. Some people may turn in papers in other forms, i.e., plain  $\TeX$ , ASCII plain text, FrameMaker, or hand written. But they are all converted into  $\LaTeX 2_{\epsilon}$ .

$\TeX$  is my word processing program of choice—not only for math papers, but for writing letters, creating projects for other people, etc.

**DW:** Most people in the world eschew  $\TeX$  and its command based approach in favor of visually oriented typesetting or word processing systems such as InDesign, Word, etc. What makes  $\TeX$  preferable to those for you?

**CP:** Word and other visually oriented typesetting or word processing systems are good for many things, such as, letters, labels, envelopes, mail merges, etc. However, mathematics is not one of their best qualities. I have already done one presentation and I am doing another in October for Princeton University to show why  $(\LaTeX)$  is better for mathematics. I briefly explain how and why Don Knuth started  $\TeX$ . Then I proceed to explain and show the difficulties in Word versus the ease in  $\LaTeX$ . Since most college students do some form of programming I explain how it is just another form of code.

**SD:** Visually oriented systems such as Word are fine for WYSIWYG systems. But when it comes to mathematics, there is so much more control for the user using  $\TeX$ . I have worked on papers that need much more specific spacing in the mathematics than any systems like Word, FrameMaker, etc., can provide.

**DW:** Cheryl, how did you come to join TUG and give workshops for TUG, did you do the workshops together from the beginning, how many or for what events have you given them, and how has the content developed over time?

**CP:** I became a member of TUG because of Sue. She also initiated doing the workshops. Sue also encouraged me to be on the board, which was a good thing. From the beginning we have been a team doing the workshops. The content has changed with the new features that  $\LaTeX$  has to offer over  $\TeX$ . Our classes basically haven't changed too much because it is more of a beginners workshop and there are usually new people. I believe some people attend the workshops more than once for a refresher because they might not need all the features all the time.

**DW:** Does CCR support these workshop activities in any way, or do you give them on your own time?

**CP:** CCR supports the workshops for me as long as they are in conjunction with a conference. Our company is also a TUG institutional member. If I do any outside workshops other than TUG, it is on my own.

**SD:** CCR La Jolla supports my workshop activities. They like that I am on the Board of Directors (as Secretary). They support all of my travel for TUG events.

**DW:** Sue, Cheryl's earlier answer indicates you became a member of TUG before she did. What led you to join TUG and how did your participation in TUG evolve?

**SD:** When I was first hired here at CCR La Jolla, my boss suggested that I join TUG. I was not that active until I started going to the conferences. I enjoy being involved in that sort of planning. I got to know various board members and I decided I wanted to be on the board because I thought I could be of some help. There was an open slot which I was happy to fill.

After being on the board for a few months, I realized that Cheryl would be a great addition. So I spoke to her about it and she was willing to do it.

Cheryl and I started implementing workshops because it seemed that all of the  $\TeX$  conferences were technical and not at all user friendly. There were a lot of people out there who wanted to share how they were using  $\TeX$ . The first workshop,  $\TeX$  Northeast, was in New York City; it was a great success and well attended.

*DW*: Cheryl, will you please tell me a little more about the format and content of the workshops you give with Sue or alone? And how many TUG workshops have you done to date?

*CP*: Sue and I have done five together and I have done one on my own for TUG. We have a sample document with the basic information you would need to do a math paper. It shows how to do sections, subsections, etc., as well as doing theorems, lemmas and so on. We show how to do tables, figures, table of contents. We also show how to do different types of equations, labeling and referencing, and adding graphics. There is a sample on the TUG web site for the workshops: <http://tug.org/practicaltex2006/workshop.html>.

*DW*: Please tell me any thoughts either of you has for how someone who can't take your workshop or learn  $\TeX$  personally from one of you should go about learning  $\TeX$  in the most efficient manner?

*CP*: I would suggest going to the TUG web site. Click on the link  $\LaTeX$ . This will bring you to a page that says: *LaTeX—A Document Preparation System*. This gives very helpful information on getting started. I would then get a book. There are many good books; one good one is *Math into  $\LaTeX$ : An Introduction to  $\LaTeX$  and AMS- $\LaTeX$*  and another is *A Guide to  $\LaTeX$*  by Kopka and Daly.

*DW*: More generally, since you often teach more-or-less beginning users of  $\TeX$ , are there common stumbling blocks you see?

*CP*: The biggest problem we have is when the computers don't work properly. As for the  $\TeX$ , if we have  $\TeX$  Live loaded things are o.k. for a beginners' workshop. We use the basic math and fonts packages.

*DW*: Thank you both for taking the time to participate in this interview. It has been a great pleasure for me to learn about you and your involvement with  $\TeX$ .