Computing Educators Oral History Project
Boots Cassel video snippet transcript
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Attending a SIGCSE conference for the first time

[Off-camera voice of Vicki Almstrum as interviewer: So the story that we had talked about is your first SIGCSE and sort of what that's led to.]

OK! So the first time I came to SIGCSE I had just started work at a small college. I was the founding department chair of the computing department; also head of the academic computing center; and the only computer scientist in the college. And I was scared to death. And I came to SIGCSE for help. And I was very shy (believe it or not!). And I went through the whole meeting not speaking at all. It was wonderful because I had to talk so much at home. I didn't talk at all. And finally there came the Birds-of-a-Feather sessions and there was a session on new programs. Sounded right, that's exactly what I had. So I went to the session on new programs and there were a bunch of people there. The problem is we all had new programs and we all had questions and nobody had any answers. So we were not much help to each other. Then somebody came in and said, "Well, there's a real lively session down the hall on four-year programs. Maybe that would help." So we all got up en masse and moved to the session on four-year programs. And I sat down. It was a big room, there were a lot of people there and I sat quietly, as I usually did. And Larry Gene was talking. And Larry Gene was a really interesting person who had been very, very active in supporting programs, in getting computer science going, in getting educational programs going. He'd done a lot of things. I didn't know that then, because I had never met him. But he was talking and the conversation — you see, we came in in the middle of it — the conversation was

about how people could get credit for taking courses that prepared them to teach computer science, and there was a lot of talk. And finally it got to me and I finally raised my hand and said, "I don't need credit. I need help. I have to teach every course. And I don't know how I'm going to do that." And he listened. People listened. While I was speaking, this tall, white-haired man walked into the room. And Larry Gene looked at him, looked at me, and said, "You should know him." And that was Dick Austing. That's how I met him. And after the session — the session then talked about some other things and became kind of interesting. But Dick came over to me afterwards and said, "Where you really need to be is at the reception." But in those days the reception was in a hotel suite. It was a fairly small thing; word-of-mouth passed around. Didn't know what it was, it was very small and I never would have gone there. Never would have had the nerve to go, even if I had known it was there. I didn't know anybody. So he took me up to the reception; introduced me to … I'm going blank on his name … from Colorado … Charlie Shub! Charlie Shub! Introduced me to Charlie Shub. Said, "Charlie, she needs some help. She needs to know how to teach some courses that you know about." And then he left. I don't remember ever seeing him again that night. And Charlie said "Well what do you need?" And I said "Well, I've got to teach operating systems, and architecture, and all these things I don't know anything about. Well, I know what normal people know, but not much." And Charlie started, "Well the book you need is this. And here's some assignments. And what else do you want?" He just "blah blah blah" started, as Charlie would. And within minutes there was this whole crowd around Charlie. He was the center of attention. And that whole experience that night just epitomizes to me what SIGCSE is about. You come. You need help. You have a variety of questions. I'm sure the problems are different now than they were then, but the need is still the same. You need to connect to other people. You need people who are willing to reach out and help. And that's the same. I think SIGCSE is the same in that way. It's a lot bigger. I don't know how it feels for new people now, but that sense of community — the sense that if you've got a need, we've got people who want to help you — that's what SIGCSE is to me and always has been. And I think it still is. I hope it still is.

[Off-camera voice of Vicki Almstrum: Thank you, Boots!]

All right!