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P4 Tech Women: From Theatre to Security

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by Liz Lam, QA Lead Engineer ([@p4liz](#))

I love stories. Each one of us has one to tell. This is the start of a blog series designed to explore the stories of our own Women in Tech at Perforce. It's been fun and inspiring talking to each one of these women. As they share where they've been and how they came to where they are now, it is my hope that others will be encouraged and inspired too.

Wendy Heffner has been at Perforce for three years. She loves problem solving and supporting women in technology. Her journey to programming began on a theater stage. This is her story.

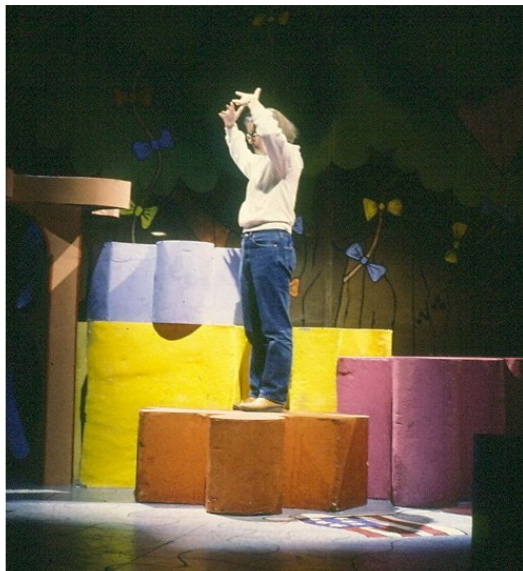
What was your first tech job?

My first job in tech was in 1974 working at Hewlett Packard as a summer intern before my freshman year at Stanford. Back then I had the fascinating job of verifying -by hand- that they had a microfilm copy of every technical drawing in their product line of scientific tools. The job was tedious but the folks at HP were nice.

I had been admitted at Stanford as an Electrical Engineering major. As with many students, I had been a big fish in a little high school pond. During freshman year I found out that I was actually mere plankton in Stanford's EE department. I exited Stanford after my senior year with a BA in Drama. I followed that up with a MFA in Technical Theater from University of Washington and then worked for the next 9 years as a lighting designer in west coast regional theaters.

When did you realize you loved working with software?

During my time as a lighting designer I took programming classes for fun. I worked with computers while designing and really enjoyed tinkering with software. I love coding because it is like an intricate, elegant puzzle. When I am in the process of crafting a piece of code, I find that I get similar enjoyment to when I was designing a series of lighting cues that meshed really well with the entire production.



What were some of your first challenges as a woman in technology?

At the end of the 9 years I looked around and saw that there were not many old lighting designers. So I looked into switching fields. Computer science was an obvious choice since I had loved programming classes. I needed, however, the background to make myself a credible job candidate so I again went back to school in 1990.



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I took advantage of a program at UC Berkeley aimed at women and underrepresented minorities with bachelor degrees in other fields. This program offered undergraduate computer science classes to the participants, so that upon completion they could apply to CS graduate programs. This was a great program and, given the dismal statistics on women in the field, one I wish still existed.

I ended up applying and getting into the graduate program in computer science and graduated with a Ph.D. focusing on multicast network protocols.

My experience at Berkeley in the graduate program was very stressful. The computer science program did not include very many women, and it had a value system that thrived on competition. The existing structured culture did not mesh well with the world view of the woman and under-represented minorities.

Compared to the mid-90s, the diversity of software has grown through adding programmers with different background areas of expertise (not just math and EE.) Changes to the ethnic and gender makeup of the workforce are lagging, however.

What was your first programming language?

Basic.

How did you get started in software?

My first job out of graduate school was at a federated database startup named Cohera. Incidentally, other Perforce employees, including [Kathy Baldanza](#) and [Zig Zichter](#) worked there as well. I had been hired as the networking developer in a company of database developers. I implemented their communications layer and then started on adding in SSL. Initially I tried using OpenSSL. The code was (and still is) impenetrable but at that time there was also neither documentation nor examples.

Did you have any mentors that helped you along the way?

Yes, I've had many over the years and they helped me every step of the way.

[Anita Borg](#) was not a direct mentor but she was my role model. She was a researcher at DEC Labs and I encountered her both at Berkeley and at the first Grace Hopper Conference for Women in Engineering.

How did you get started with Perforce and version control?

We used Perforce at Cohera and it was love at first sight. :-)

What is your role now at Perforce?

I'm the Technical Lead of the Cluster Project in the server group. (Informally, I am the self-proclaimed "goddess of networking")

What language do you code in today?

C++

You've gone to the Grace Hopper Conference twice now during pretty different times in the Software Industry. How did they compare?

I received a student scholarship to attend the first Grace Hopper Conference in 1994. The conference was the brainchild of Anita Borg after a discussion in the woman's restroom at a technical conference. She was remarking that she hardly ever saw other women and she observed that tech conferences are one of the few events where a woman's restroom is nearly empty. Although Anita was very much a feminist whirlwind, the conference she put together was traditional blend of presentations on academic research and new industry innovation. The novel component was the the speakers and audience of 450 were 95% women in tech (some men did attend as well). By attending the conference I had a chance to see, connect and discuss issues with other women in tech and to discover that not all of the "existing culture" of the field was innate.

I went to last year's conference and the growth of the conference to 4,750 was astounding. Its technical tracks still contained a mixture of academic research and industry innovation, but now there were additional tracks discussing navigation of the field as a woman. The additional tracks targeted career advancement, strategies, how to handle culture clash, and recruiting and retention of women in the field.

What advice would you give to women getting into the software industry?

Do it, we need you, but make sure you are following your passion.

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About the author

Liz Lam plays on Team QA at Perforce Software. She loves breaking software, contributing ideas to new features and apparently writing blogs while consuming large amounts of coffee.

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