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2004: A CSUN Odyssey

by Johana Swartz

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Disneyland faced stiff competition when 4000 people from all over the world journeyed to Los Angeles for the March 2004 California State University-Northridge "Technology and Persons with Disabilities" Conference (CSUN 2004). The record number of attendees found six days bustling with excitement at the Los Angeles International Airport Hilton and Marriott. Like Disneyland, CSUN 2004 offers a dazzling array of attractions that kept all stakeholders busy, no matter whether their involvement in assistive technology is as people who rely on it, develop it, provide technological service and support, or anything else.



I came to CSUN 2004 in my dual capacities as a consumer of assistive technology and as a professional in the field. Here is my odyssey.

My work brought me to the CSUN conference this year; as an employee of Augmentative Communication Inc. (ACI), I was invited to promote our exciting new project, the Writers Brigade. While at CSUN, I served as a spokesperson for ACI and for the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Communication Enhancement (AAC-RERC). Professional involvements and personal technology interests guided my itinerary.

I found that the AAC-RERC was well represented at CSUN 2004. Partners from its various member institutions, including Sarah Blackstone, Kevin Caves, Frank DeRuyter, Jeff Higginbotham, Howard Shane, and Michael B. Williams, convened here to present an overview of the AAC-RERC's recently funded 5-year proposal. Armed with a new endowment from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), the team had much to share in many sessions. I appreciated the opportunity to introduce myself in person to the people I work with virtually and to hear them speak about their projects first hand.

The AAC-RERC partners and staff gave but a tiny fraction of the sessions presented this year and hosted only one of the hundreds of booths in the conference Exhibit Halls. The plethora of offerings targeted a wide range of interests, with the program guide clearly specifying the designated audience and level of expertise intended by each speaker. Along with the helpful guide, the conference provided other accommodations that enhanced the accessibility of the sessions. Navigating between the two hotels was easy, thanks to a free shuttle service, plenty of guides directing us to elevators and conference rooms, and long intervals between sessions to allow people with disabilities time to commute. During sessions, CSUN 2004 provided sign language interpreters upon request.

I especially appreciated these accommodations because such support encourages consumers to maximize their experience at CSUN 2004. I was part of the panel who gave a presentation on the Writers Brigade on behalf of the AAC-RERC. I was delighted by the turnout of people who use assistive technology at our session, since the Writers Brigade is designed for them.

The sessions are one of several avenues connecting different stakeholder groups in AAC. A rewarding aspect of the presentations is that the speakers were available afterwards for questions and comments. I felt welcome to approach Melvin Dashner from Origin Instruments Corporation, when I recognized potential in the head tracking technology he was demonstrating for my own communication needs. He encouraged me to follow up by visiting Origin Instruments' booth in the exhibit hall. There I received personal guidance while I tried out the tracker and initiated steps to obtain one.

In the sea of exhibitors I was treated to individualized attention, and even troubleshooting sessions with high-ranking officers of the various companies present, like Prentke Romich Company, the developer of the communication device I use. I could have spent all day in the exhibit halls (yes, there were that many vendors!), benefiting from the opportunity to try out new products from a cross section of companies, compare them, and determine exactly which one was right for me. A rare opportunity, indeed.

At the CSUN 2004 conference, the networking opportunities did not stop at the sessions or in the exhibitor halls. Led by president Iris Fishman, the United States Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (USSAAC) held its annual meeting onsite. I observed members who use AAC devices gathering with other USSAAC members to join committees and work jointly on membership, the newsletter, and the next Bubbly Ball.

The first-ever Bubbly Ball, USSAAC's mission to bring together AAC stakeholders of all stripes, succeeded with style. A crowd of current and prospective members filled a festive ballroom to honor USSAAC member Michael B. Williams with a roast and a champagne toast. Michael, as a consumer, long-time leader and advocate in the community, is an inspiration to all. As one roaster, Ana Berlowitz, expressed in a tribute she gave using her AAC device, Michael is on a par with the legendary civil rights activist Rosa Parks. Another roaster, Jim Pepper, ignited the audience with laughter with his tale of Michael lighting up and burning down his Berkeley digs in the 1960's during a smoking incident. The celebration showcased Snoopi Botten who entertained us with his extraordinary musical interpretation of Mariah Carrey's *Hero*, sung on his communication device. Actress Laura San Giacomo (*Just Shoot Me*) hosted the event and talked about her commitment to AAC using one of her son's communication devices.

The social opportunities to network overflowed into the numerous cafes and lounges dotting the lobbies of the host hotels. Informal chats in these settings brought together all kinds of people. Over coffee, I reunited with old friends and speech therapists and, through them, met some new ones hailing from far-flung places like Ireland, Canada, Asia, and the South Pacific. Yet, despite the impressive diversity and the large numbers of consumers present, I can see the potential for even more involvement from people who use AAC.

Why come to the Conference on Technology and Disability at CSUN next year? As a consumer who presented a session, I felt empowered. Attending sessions with my colleagues and people I admire, combined with visiting the exhibit halls afforded me a well-rounded and satisfying experience. I observed projects of the AAC-RERC and exciting technology that is only in its infancy. The suspense is on--my curiosity is aroused. I will have to see how the projects unfold and follow up on the development of new technology. Just as Disneyland continually lures us with new rides, the CSUN conference continues to attract us by offering us a glimpse of the new frontiers in the fast-changing field of assistive technology. I'll be back...

Until registration opens for CSUN 2005, visit these websites for more information:

Augmentative Communication Inc.
www.augcominc.com

Rehabilitation and Research Engineering Center on Communication Enhancement
www.aac-rerc.com

Technology and Persons with Disabilities Conference Center on Disabilities
California State University Northridge
www.csun.edu/cod

United States Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication
www.usaac.org

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