
Missing Mimi

Christina Thiele

My last exchange with Mimi Burbank was Nov. 19, 2010. I'd seen a CTAN notice about a new package, `excel2latex` — it just sounded so neat, that I thought she'd like to see it. Turned out that she actually *needed* something just like it:

```
I've got lots of files I'd love to add to
my latex files - but can't because of the
excel spreadsheet junk... but now it looks
like I can ;-) may have to give it a try...
```

And the very next day:

```
attached is a PDF file - not finished of
course, but I'm so glad I've got this pkg
now...
need to remember how to do landscape and
all sorts of things... and need to read
some more directions - but this file is one
I have to send to donors in the UK all the
time, and doing it
using a google email "docs" page is not my
favorite way to do things...
so glad you sent the the info on it...
mimi
```

Typical!

* * *

Ten days later, on the 29th, I got a call from Charles Burbank — Mimi Burbank had died the night before, in Kasese, Uganda, at the age of 69. She was buried there three days later, in St. Paul's Cathedral cemetery. She had two sons, Charles and Bill. And a world of friends.

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I've been struggling to write this piece, which Karl suggested a few months ago, and I think it's because, for me, Mimi's not really 'gone'. She lives on, in a way that could never have been imagined (much less possible) 30 years ago — she 'lives' on the 'net, in web pages and in e-mail that's spread around the entire planet.

She's a permanent presence on my computer, in yearly folders of e-mail I've kept, both personal and TUG-specific, that date back to 1991. I've been re-reading some of our exchanges and they make me smile, or laugh outright. The woman had a sense of humour that would always, at the end of the day, make any short-lived storm revert to its proper dimensions as a tempest in a teapot — or a real problem which needed to be addressed head-on. The sheer quantity of mail also reminds me that, during the '90s, we didn't seem to have anything in our lives other than our jobs and TUG :-).

And that's just between us two! My machine is only one small home where SCREAMING MIMI can be found — she's present in so many more places.

Sometimes our exchanges would get lost on her monitor, as she'd have over a dozen windows open on her computer, both work and correspondence in progress, on-site and off, working on issues ranging from system or software or administrative matters, to \TeX questions and TUG work. I have to say, Mimi never met a question she didn't want to find an answer to, either from her own extensive experience or someone else's! And what she didn't know, she'd find someone to solve it. Or she'd figure it out herself. She was tireless when it came to getting a job done ... getting many jobs done!

Indeed, one of Mimi's greatest qualities was her lack of fear — learning new programs, installing new software, working with new hardware ... whereas I have always met 'the new' with varying degrees of hesitation and reluctance. I've always admired that quality in her, and continue to remind myself of it.

* * *

Mimi and I both started attending TUG meetings in 1987, but I didn't actually meet her until the 1991 Dedham meeting in Massachusetts.¹ I was on the Program Committee, and had been asked to join Hope Hamilton's editorial team as well, for the proceedings.² Along with Dian De Sha from CalTech, Mimi and I were her editorial assistants, each of us given articles to work on. Working through our assigned articles, we all got to know one another via e-mail, and Mimi and I took off like a house on fire, as they say. It was that collaborative work on the proceedings that cemented our friendship, and she subsequently joined TUG's board in 1993 (I'd been a member since 1988). And it was Mimi who initiated an as-yet unpublished article on the whole experience, entitled "A Tale of 4 Witties", which I'd in fact just re-sent her in mid-October of last year, to her great amusement.

We had both become intensely interested in TUG's conference proceedings and program committees, and eventually were part of the move to expand the production team approach to regular *TUGboat* issues. A great stimulus for this was Mimi's having found a way to arrange that SCRI, her work site (the Supercomputer Computations Research Institute in

¹ We continued attending together until the 1995 meeting in Florida, which we jointly oversaw; she went to one more, in Russia in 1996; and my last one was the 1999 Vancouver meeting.

² I'd been proceedings editor for both the 1988 and 1989 meetings; Lincoln Durst was editor for the one in 1990, and Hope and I had met when lending him a hand with it.

Tallahassee, Florida), provide computer space and access for team members to work remotely.³ We had Robin Fairbairns, Sebastian Rahtz, and Michel Goossens over in Europe, and then Barbara, Mimi, and me in North America — we were like a round-the-clock service bureau :-).

Our deep involvement with TUG activities carried on throughout the '90s, gradually returning to just the *TUGboat* production team by the start of the new millennium. During my term as TUG president, I leaned heavily upon her support and advice, both of which always evinced common sense laced with humour.

Gradually, though, we each eased out of our TUG roles, me by 2000 and Mimi by 2005. Mimi had become increasingly active in her church, St. Peter's Anglican Church, in Tallahassee, which culminated in her decision to leave the States permanently, for St. Peter's mission in Uganda. Now *that* was a big surprise — Mimi, whose first trips outside the country had been the Aston meeting in 1993 (we drove around Wales for a week after that!), the 1996 Dubna meeting in Russia, and a week's vacation here in Ottawa in August of 1998, deciding to *move* permanently to Uganda. Wow!

Before she left, Mimi wrote up her TUG experiences in an interview with Dave Walden for TUG's Interview Corner. One of her non-TUG activities that should be mentioned is that of providing on-line support for Y&Y \TeX , along with Robin and myself, in the early 2000s. The list we started, *yandytex*, is now on the TUG server, having moved there after Y&Y finally ceased operations.

* * *

Within weeks of having left for Uganda, Mimi was again on-line with correspondence to everyone 'back home' — she'd just changed jobs, that's all! The stories had changed, from systems and software and administrative matters, to the travails of her car, the beauty of the countryside, and the generosity of its people, who fast became her new family. And Mimi herself was being transformed, into Mama Mimi, who applied all her skills not just from SCRI and TUG, but from even before then, when she'd gone to nursing school. And what she didn't know, she'd search for, via the web, to hammer away at a life that was so different from the States, and so much more in need.

Many of us would send her packages with items she said were desperately needed, books and school

³ Reading the Production Notes for issues 15:2 through 16:1 will provide a quick snapshot of the fundamental changes that were wrought in the latter part of 1994 and into 1995.

supplies above all. I'd fill in the spaces with a few things for her, too — seeds, spices she couldn't find locally, toiletries, even some candies from time to time :-). In return, Mimi would send us photos and stories about so many daily events. She even joined in the fun of a school project my daughter had, of sending a 'Flat Stanley' cut-out to Kasese, and snapping photos of the 'cardboard boy' in various locations around town.

She would write these great, long messages to us (sometimes there were over 60 cc's on such mail!), and then finally decided to pull them all into a journal structure — using pdf \TeX , in fact. She also set up a web page at the St. Peter's site, remotely, from Uganda (!), as well as working on the local site for the South Rwenzori Diocese. Eventually she became a Skype user, much to her son Charles' delight.

Mimi went back to the States a couple of times, for health reasons, and finally these became too much for her. She died in the night of Nov. 28, having turned 69 on the 24th and celebrated Thanksgiving on the 25th.

Of the many causes, be they formal or simply benevolent, Mimi felt passionate about, I know of two: BUFO (Base Camp United Christian Foundation), and the Astro Book Drive. A donation to either would be a fitting memorial to this best of friends, most constant of colleagues — a single person whose life has not ceased to make a difference.

◇ Christina Thiele
15 Wiltshire Circle
Nepean, ON K2J 4K9, Canada
cthiele (at) *ncf dot ca*

References and resources

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2. Mimi's website and journals: www.saint-peters-archives.org/files/mamamimi/
3. Mimi's Facebook page: www.facebook.com/people/Mimi-Burbank/1063046798
4. Articles about Mimi's work in Kasese, Uganda:
www.liquida.com/kasese
kasesestreetkids.blogspot.com/2010/12/burial-of-dear-mimi.html
5. St. Peter's Anglican Church, Tallahassee:
www.saint-peters.net
6. South Rwenzori Diocese: www.southrd.org
7. Base Camp United Christian Foundation and contact person: www.basecampngo.org
8. Astro Book Drive and contact person:
astrodrive.lakdiva.net and bit.ly/f8M3Gt
9. Mailing list for the Y&Y \TeX system:
lists.tug.org/yandytex