

LASEWICZ: This is an oral history interview with Gina, IBM Program Director of Conversational Speech Technologies in Pervasive Computing, conducted on September 10, 2003, by IBM Corporate Archivist, Paul Lasewicz. Thank you and welcome. Can you tell me what your field of study was during your educational process and why you chose that field?

GINA: Electrical engineering. I received Bachelors' and Masters' Degrees in Electrical Engineering from North Carolina A&T State University. I actually came to EE because I decided against my first love physics in my senior year of high school. I enjoyed my electro-magnetics studies in Physics and decided EE was a viable alternative.

LASEWICZ: When did you first start becoming interested in the field?

GINA: In electrical engineering, when I was in high school. I always knew I was going to be a scientist. So, growing up, I wanted to be a doctor. But, I didn't know anything about engineering growing up. I didn't find out about that until I was in the North Carolina School of Science and Math.

I had an opportunity when I moved to the Research Triangle area to go to companies like IBM to understand what engineers did and go to Duke Hospital and figure out what doctors did. And I decided I didn't want to be a doctor anymore and I wanted to be an engineer.

LASEWICZ: You said you were always interested in science. Was there an "a ha!" moment when you realized that, or what was it about it that really caught your eye early on?

GINA: I think my interest in science became what I wanted to do because I loved my pediatrician, and I wanted to be just like him. So, I said, "I'm going to be a doctor."

I loved science in school. I loved biology, physics and chemistry. As I began to grow up and have more and more science-related courses and math courses, I knew I would pursue something in the area of science.

I figured... I could probably make a career out of this.

I knew science was my love, my passion, it's what made me excited in school. I loved doing it. I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a scientist.

LASEWICZ: It sounds like you spent a lot of time envisioning what working as a scientist or an engineer might be like. Has what you envisioned panned out, or is the working world different than what you thought it might be?

GINA: It is different, but better than what I envisioned. I didn't envision having so many opportunities to use my science background to do other things. And having so much fun.

What my degrees have allowed me to do is to be open to a lot of avenues where I can have contributed technically and as a leader. So, that was different.

I thought that I would do this job, be an engineer, and then go off to do the things that I really liked to do. I soon found that this was what I liked to do and it would be my career. I have been faced with new challenges and different opportunities that made the desire to seek that outside focus limited. Being an engineer allows you a great deal of flexibility, I've been fortunate to be able to contribute in many important and exciting roles.

LASEWICZ: Going back to some of your early influences, you mentioned your pediatrician as a role model. Were there any other figures that you grew up with that kind of helped shape your thinking on the subject?

GINA: I'd have to absolutely say my mom and my grandma, because they always supported my dreams and believed in me. Whatever wild idea I had, they supported it. As long as I was willing to work hard, and find out what was necessary to make it work, and do whatever was necessary to succeed.

They really were my supporters and my foundation. The "wind beneath my wings" so to speak. My dreams took my far away from home and their support made those times bearable and made it possible for me to leave home and be Ok with embracing the challenges required to succeed.

LASEWICZ: A lot of people run into kind of dead-ends on a particular subject when they get a bad teacher along the way. Did you ever run into a bad teacher, or were all your teachers' very positive figures for you?

GINA: I'd like to say all my teachers were positive, but they weren't. But, I had great teachers in science. One of the ones that come to mind was my physics teacher, in high school.

And it was because of him I think I became an electrical engineer, because he taught me about the electro-magnetics part of physics. And he encouraged me to go on these summer

enrollment enrichment camps, where I would learn what real engineers did.

And so, I expanded my scientific knowledge and understood what I was getting into before I had to even enroll in college. There have been really great teachers along the way: great English teachers that knew that I didn't like it, but I knew I had to do it.

And then the science teachers who encouraged me to go to science camps, or be a part of scientific clubs, or just encouraged me and pushed me beyond where I wanted to be, or where I even thought I could be.

Because school was easy, it was easy to become complacent and say, you know, I can take this class, but they challenged me to do something above my grade level or do something outside of the regular curriculum. And I had a great teacher at home-- my mom was a teacher. I think she helped me a lot... I got to take the test that her class was going to take, because I was the guinea pig.

[LAUGHTER]

Because of my Mom, I always viewed learning as fun. ...A lot of people probably will say she's, a nerd, but... [LAUGHTER] I've had a lifetime of enjoying the process of learning. And I have my Mom to Thank for that.

LASEWICZ: You took a test at home?

GINA: Yes, I'd take tests at home? But really, we read a lot and focused on education. So, learning was associated with a fun atmosphere, so I always pursued it.

LASEWICZ: You talked about the summer camps, and you mentioned some of the things that you did either above the grade level, or outside the classroom. Can you describe those a little bit?

GINA: Yes, I had some great summer camps at some top universities. Attending those programs helped me expand my knowledge of science and what I could do with an Electrical Engineering degree.

I met electrical engineers that were doing software development; some were doing hardware development, some that weren't doing development at all... [they] really were in more of a strategy kind of role. Some that were electrical engineers that were doing mechanical engineer work.

I thought, "Wow, you could really do anything you want with this degree." I also had a great high school. It was a residential high school. We had 300 students, and our focus was math and science. We had some of the best professors in

the world, I'd say. And I got to have them at the high school level, where they clearly could've been teaching at any university. They made learning very interesting.

We did classroom projects and built things to see whether the theory that we just learned worked, and how it would work practically. This was the best approach to train an aspiring engineer. Taking that theory out of the book and making it real.

Those were some of the best high school memories that I have -- stretching me and making me do things that are not normal science projects or high school learning.

LASEWICZ: It sounds very challenging. We talked a little bit about some role models that you ran across early on. In the course of your education and now into your career, have you dealt with mentors? Have you had mentors, have you been a mentor for somebody?

GINA: Yes, yes, and yes. So, I'd say early on I didn't think of them as mentors. They were just people who allowed me talk to them about my concerns and guided me in ways because they were experienced. I probably started using the word mentor at IBM. I've had many mentors throughout my career.

I don't want to name them because I'll forget somebody. [LAUGHTER] But just say that I had them early on, and I think that has contributed to some of the successes that I've been able to have along the way, is to be able to dialogue with someone who's already been through the path, to say, "Does this make sense?"

Because everybody's path is different, and everybody's dreams and goals are different in the company, but at least to have somebody to say, "Does this make sense, I want to do this because."

And then use them as a sounding board to say, "Given that I want to be here, is this going to take me off that path, or is that going to help accelerate it, or is that even in a path that IBM would even care about?"

I think mentors at different stages of your career are important. Earlier, I had technical mentors that were really there to help shape me as an engineer and [with] my technical contribution.

But today I focus more on leadership mentors that help me with my management styles. And as I have more and more responsibility in the company and managing larger organizations, how do you do that, how do you approach that,

and how do you do that in a way that fits into what would be viewed as excellent in the IBM model.

I'm a mentor to others. Simply because I enjoy and I didn't get here by myself, I really see it as my responsibility for new employees in IBM, to share with them, my experiences and my path.

It's not necessarily going to be their path, but there are some clear mistakes that, I've made and they can learn from. Also some pitfalls that I would help them steer around.

Or, talking to them about where they want to be, and from my experiences, in the company, how best to get there. Sharing with them whatever wisdom I've acquired... they would have to tell you whether they believe it's wisdom, but to really share with them what I've learned. And hoping that their journey in IBM while not always perfect will be enriching and positive.

LASEWICZ: Okay. Let's talk about the specifics of your career to date. You joined IBM in '92. Can you talk about what your positions that you've held over the course of time, and the job you have now, and what you do in that job?

GINA: I started in IBM in '92 as a systems engineer, in Manassas, Virginia -- wonderful Manassas, Federal Systems

Division. And my job really was --, if I had to tell it in child's terms --, design a life-sized video game to train sailors that were going to go out on submarines.

We developed what was called the Submarine Ocean Acoustic Trainer System. And the trainer system is in San Diego, Groton, Connecticut, and Pearl Harbor training facilities.

And it goes over multiple [floors], so it really was a complete solution and not a product. But, it allows sailors to be trained on land for what they were going to do in their six-month missions.

My role as systems engineer was the design and development of underwater acoustics models.

I had to work very closely with the Navy and understand their data so when we developed our system, we would be able to reflect an accurate representation of the tactical systems

My signal processing came to good use for me in my first job. And that was fun, because I actually got to sit with the customer. And I think that's the best place to start in your career, is working directly with the customer.

I valued my time in Federal Systems, I learned project management. I learned about customer relationship

management. I learned about taking your technical theory knowledge and actually having it turn into a system that someone is going to use and actually got out to deploy that system for the customer.

You develop and then you deploy it, end to end, and so that was exciting. We had fun and we delivered our system on time. I got to go to Hawaii multiple times to make sure the systems were up and running in Pearl Harbor. I was making a significant contribution. One that I could touch and feel and see the customer's expression. I was loving IBM. It was a great experience. FSD was sold to another company during my first assignment. I remained with the other company for 2 yrs.

I rejoined IBM, in '96, because it was time to get back to where I really wanted to be. I went to North Carolina in the area I worked in as a coop. It was now the Network Hardware Division.

I was initially responsible for network performance but then moved into a management role.

I had learned in my FSD days that technical leadership roles are what I really loved. I enjoyed leading a team, or leading a project more than I loved doing a component on the individual product or projects.

I had leveraged by technical results to a position of leadership and was ready to move into the next phase of my career, which was management. I began managing a team of software engineers.

I got to learn a lot about myself in management that I didn't know about myself in engineering. I'd encourage people to do that. That's a growth assignment, really, in a lot of ways. I stayed with NHD until '99, and then I moved to the Server Group.

I was what we call a PDT (Project Development Team) lead, where I was responsible not just for the development part of the project, but bringing all the pieces together: development, marketing, sales, manufacturing, all the functional responsibilities pulling together in a team environment and saying, "How do we deliver this product?"

That was my first job really outside of a technical realm, when I can get to see other functions, and what other people who didn't major in engineering did in IBM. That was exciting. During my time in SG was the launch of a new entry-level server platform, our new e-server brand and the first pre-loaded Linux offerings.

Then I went to a fun assignment in corporate technology, where I did corporate technical strategy for the Corporate Technology Council (now Technology Team).

I was responsible for bringing teams of experts together and facilitating technical discussions that would result in technical strategies for IBM's future. I also had similar responsibilities in driving our Emerging Technology Strategy efforts.

What was great is that once a month, I got to sit in on the meetings where our senior vice presidents talk about the future of the company. They were reviewing and making decisions based on the strategy assessments I had contributed to. It was an excellent opportunity to broaden my perspective from the areas I had worked in and to see the role each business unit played in IBM's technical strategy.

I really enjoyed that assignment. And it stretched me in that now I have to think strategically, and I think about technical strategies and how we develop them.

I took away from that a lot of new skills, in addition to my technical background, now I had added some skills about strategy, and how we put together an organization's future, how we put together a technology area's future. But, you

can only do that for year, and then they send you back to do real work.

So I joined the Software Group, and I became the operations manager for the Pervasive Computing Portal and Server development team. That's the division I'm in today. I'm just in a different role.

Operations' was focused on the financial part of running the business, or what does it take, headcount, the execution strategies, and the execution deliveries.

That led to my assignment today here in Yorktown, where I manage the second line organization where I have teams worldwide that deliver on our speech technologies.

Our speech technologies are core to our pervasive voice solutions and value added partnership relationships. We deliver products Web Sphere Voice Server, and Web Sphere Voice Application Access.

LASEWICZ: You mentioned early on that you used a lot of your technical training when you first started working at IBM that was very relevant. Has that proven true as you've moved on, or have there been other parts of your training that have become more relevant or less relevant?

GINA: I'd say my electrical engineering degrees have become less relevant. But my technical acumen will always be relevant and required to be successful in my current career path.

I think the job that I do today requires a technical background in that you need to be comfortable in understanding and having dialogue with people who are on the technical side and people who are non-technical. Since I have a technical background, I'm comfortable in both areas.

What has also become relevant today for me are the leadership skills and the management skills that I've acquired over the years in IBM. In addition, my knowledge of IBM's environment, how to navigate and influence in this large company.

We're going through a lot of changes now, in terms of changing our strategy and organization, responding to new competitive threats. So instead of the design of my components I now focus on creating an environment for other SW developers to do their best work.

Those are things I learned not in college but learned at IBM. I've learned by watching others, by talking to my mentors, making decisions and evaluating the effectiveness of those decisions.

The things that I learned in college did not allow me to do that, but certainly the things that I learned in IBM allow me to understand how to look at those shifts and changes, and make decisions based on what the market says, or what the future of the technologies might be, or what organizational climate is.

I have a different dialogue or different vocabulary than I did coming into the company as an engineer, when I knew -- amps and volts, and ohms. [LAUGHTER] Now I know things like organization climate and strategy and building organizational capability.

LASEWICZ: Was that a natural shift for you? Did you feel comfortable doing that, or was that something that came more difficult to you?

GINA: It was natural for me. I always knew that the engineering part or the technical part of my job was going to be short term. That and one of the reasons I went forward to get a Masters degree, was to position myself for leadership roles.

I was willing to invest that extra two years to say, when I joined IBM, now I have something that sort of distinguishes me from engineers, and maybe that, plus my technical

accomplishments will move me into the leadership role more quickly. That was the thinking...

... I always knew that that was a transition that I was very comfortable with: leadership roles and taking charge.

I think I'm a project manager by birth. I manage projects internally with IBM, and you manage projects in your life just because you're a list maker and you like things orderly. And you know how to organize things, and people look to you to do those things.

I think those skills were inherent in me outside of my degree, my technical degree. That's just the kind of person I am. That really helped the transition into management in that you need to be able to organize things, you need to be able to look at things at a higher level, at a bigger picture.

And you need to be able to relate to different people on different things, and know that going together forward might require some leadership from you...

...no matter where you are, even if it's not your position to lead, sometimes you might be called on to help the team move forward. I was very comfortable with taking that responsibility.

LASEWICZ: What do you find most satisfying about what you do?

GINA: Oh gosh, that is different every day. It's based on what's going on in terms of the management environment, or what's going on in terms of understanding the financials, or who my competitors are and what they're doing and staying abreast of what the marketplace that we serve.

I get to look at different parts of running a business. I don't have to be as focused or as ... pigeonholed as I was as an engineer, when they only wanted me to do one thing. You didn't need to think about anything else but this component or this module that you're supposed to be developing.

Don't get me wrong my job is to ensure the on time development of our offering as committed to the IPMT. But along the way I get to take "detours" into strategy, Marketing, Customer Care, Sales...

What I find satisfying is that what's valued about me, I think in my organization [skills], is that I can manage multiple tasks successfully. I am privileged to be able to be in a role that allows me to do that and often requires that for success.

And that I have available to me a whole company of choices and activities, and opportunities. As I was going through my resume with you, I've had the opportunity to move within the company, to move to different sites, to move between groups...

...just to see and gain experiences in different parts of our businesses, which I think ultimately makes me a stronger manager and a stronger solutions-minded employee for the company, because ultimately that's what I think we provide our customers: not just products but solutions.

LASEWICZ: As you've been moving from position to position, site to site and organization to organization, have you had to face any specific challenges, and if so, how did you overcome them?

GINA: There's always the challenge of starting over. It was harder for me earlier in my career than it is now. Moving and being a person who values moving within the company, sometimes you land in an organization where they value people or skills different than what you bring.

I've learned you just have to figure out what it takes to be successful in your new environment and go for it. After a few times learning to adapt becomes easier and you bring to

the challenge a set of experiences of having conquered the task before.

And I think I can add value to any organizations and as I grow to those organizations ultimately makes me a better leader because I can see things from different perspectives.

You face that by understanding the environment. I had mentors that I talked to about moves. I have friends that I talked to and then I read up. We have great access to data, whether internal or external, about what it takes to succeed in a new area. I typically face those challenges by studying.

At the end of the day, whatever I do, I'm still that engineer who knows how to just face the challenges by finding ways to figure it out.

LASEWICZ: You also mentioned feeling a little pigeonholed early on. Was that an obstacle for you?

GINA: It was in that the kind of person I am, to think that I would come in and be an engineer and be in the lab for 30 years in IBM just wasn't realistic for me. But, sometimes that's what I felt like as a young engineer -- "Is this what you hired me to do this one little thing, that's not what I thought."

You hired me because I had all of this knowledge, right, and these two engineering degrees. [LAUGHTER] And I was going to go out and conquer the world. And you can't conquer the world if you're only allowed to do one little piece.

That required me to seek people who would allow me to branch out. And I was lucky enough, in my career, that I found that in my chief engineer, and he recognized that I could do things other than what I was being asked to do, and allowed me to do them and allowed me to grow.

I think that's important. It's important to find someone or find an environment that allows you to constantly grow because that's how you can keep providing value. If you're not growing, then it's going to be difficult for you to keep providing value.

It was a difficult environment, but I found a way out of it. And I found a way to an ally that said, "Yes, you do need to grow, and you do have some skills. But you do need to work on this too." You need some grounding, because you can't always be flying.

You're there to do a job, or you're there to do a task or some delivery, some results that you have to accomplish and

so that's very important to focus on that. But while you're doing that, you can also grow.

LASEWICZ: Well, one of the challenges that are facing many of us in the corporate world today is work/life balance. Has that been an issue for you, and can you talk about some of the things you've done to try to achieve work/life balance, if you have been able to?

GINA: I'll tell you honestly, I don't have it.

[LAUGHTER] And whoever has it, please show me the roadmap.

The way I approach it is there are times where work has to be prioritized over things in my life. And there are times where life has to be prioritized over things at work. And it's a constant assessing the priorities and the importance, and look at it based on the values that I set and the goals that I've set.

There are clearly some things...family things that happen or emergencies that come up that you can't plan for. Work has to take a back seat while you're dealing with life, because everyday it comes.

When you set big goals at work, you have to say, "Guess what, I have to make some sacrifices here in this life, to say maybe I need to work some overtime, or maybe I need to

move to a new city, because that's where the opportunity is."

Or maybe I need to work in an area to gain more experience to broaden me, even though I'm not crazy about it. In the long term that's going to make me a better leader.

You make priority choices or you make tradeoffs based on the long-term goal. As I say I clearly don't have anything that I would term work/life balance, [but] I think I do an adequate job at looking at my priorities...

...looking at what my long-term goals are and making decisions along the way at what I need to do at work and in my personal life, to keep a balance so I don't get too crazy on one or the other.

To keep the pie whole, as you will because you have to, because I'm a daughter, and I'm a niece, and I'm an aunt, and also, I'm a manager at IBM, and also I'm a friend.

I have a lot of roles that I have to play and keep balanced. You just keep assessing what your priorities are, and do what's right based on what you feel is your value system and what's important to you.

LASEWICZ: You're both an employee and a manager. Are there any programs that you've been able to take advantage of that have assisted in your [ability] to develop things?

GINA: Yes, actually one of the programs, when my mom was sick, I was able to take advantage of the elder care program. I was living in North Carolina then, she was living in New York, and I needed to make sure she was okay when I couldn't be there. It was causing a lot of stress for me to be able to balance that.

I called the work/life balance programs, and I had a very good counselor that helped me understand the programs, and understand how I could get some programs for my mom.

That was invaluable to me, because I wasn't doing a good job of balancing what I needed to do at work and needed to do as a daughter. And I was constantly struggling what was the right thing to do.

I found a good way to approach it. I also had a good management team that said if you need to go to New York and work from New York for a while, do that.

There's also a lot of work/life things inside IBM, not just the programs but working with your manager and saying what fits for you right now, and let's make that happen.

I've been able to do that, and I've been able to have that with some of my employees. And since I've gone through that experience, I can talk to them about it. And talk to them about how to balance that. And that's a focus too. You see it in people as you get to know them, what they're struggling with and what they're dealing with.

It's on an individual basis with your employees. But, because I've been through that and I've benefited from it, with that struggle that I had, I can help somebody else, and because the programs are there and I know that they work.

LASEWICZ: So it's as much what goes on informally, as what's out there formally.

GINA: Yes.

LASEWICZ: Well, that's about it for the questions I have, you've been very gracious in sharing your experiences and perspectives. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to comment upon?

GINA: Let's see. I would end with encouraging people to value the experiences that they can gain in IBM. We're a big company, and there are a lot of opportunities. I've been very lucky in that I've been able to experience

different parts of the company. And to be challenged and contribute in ways that I didn't imagine.

I would also say if you're not in a position that you think is a fit for you today, look inside before you look outside.

The IBM journey can sometimes be tough. You have to have mentors, you have to have people you can talk to. I think the most valuable thing in my career is that I've been able to have people as a sounding board for where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. To have people that valued my diversity, unique strengths and supported me in closing the gaps on any weaknesses.

Once you come into IBM with your technical skills, definitely take advantage of the opportunity to be a leader, a change agent, a significant contributor. Enjoy your journey and I look forward to working with you some day.