All in the Family

With Degrees from Brandeis and MIT in Hand, this Carlisle Couple Turned to MCC for Career and Technical Training

In 1983, as a recent graduate of Brandeis University, Ed Sullivan enrolled in the Software Technical Writing Program at Middlesex Community College. Armed with an English degree and no job prospects, he credits the intensive, eight-month program with redirecting his professional path toward the high-tech field, where he's now an executive at a software design firm.

"I went into the Software Technical Writing Program straight out of Brandeis," said Sullivan. "I had no preconceived ideas about the program. I just knew I had to find a job and that I wanted to learn a more practical skill."

His wife, Eileen Baird, on the other hand, was drawn to computer technology early on. The Scotland native earned her master's degree in electrical engineering at MIT on a Fulbright Scholarship. However, after a flourishing career as a software engineer, she is now shifting her focus away from the high-tech industry and has enrolled in online accounting and bookkeeping courses at MCC.

Preferring to work part time while their young daughter is in school, yet facing a declining high-tech job market, Baird began to realize her chances of finding a part-time job in her field were slim. "The whole landscape of high-tech has changed," she said. "Before the dot-com bust, I could practically write my own ticket. Now, there are less jobs and everybody is working lots of hours."

Anxious to get back to work after a two-year hiatus, she began thinking about what else she could do on a part-time basis. Having a father and sister who were accountants, Baird thought it would be interesting to pursue coursework in that field. "But, I didn't want to go back to school full time," she said, "so I enrolled in an online accounting course at MCC."

After that first successful experience with Distance Education at Middlesex, Baird signed up for another online bookkeeping course. "I'm enjoying it and it's interesting," she said. "Plus, I can do the assignments at my own pace and I can do it all at home.

"These courses are for people just like me," said Baird. "We don't necessarily want to go through a degree program, but we do want to learn something new."

When Sullivan enrolled in MCC's Software Technical Writing Program, he was almost immediately drawn to the technical part of the program. "My first job after graduating was a half-programming, half-writing job. That was my transitional job," Sullivan explained. "At that time, in the mid-'80s, the job market wasn't as flooded with technical people."

From there he moved into pure programming as a software engineer at a variety of companies, and eventually got into management. He's now vice president of engineering at Openwave Systems, which designs software for communications service providers.

With clients such as Verizon and other major Internet service providers, Sullivan's focus at Openwave is on large scale e-mail systems. "We have more than 100 million e-mail boxes. Anybody who has Verizon DSL has one of our mail boxes," he said. His division is currently tackling the pressing issue of unsolicited junk e-mail or spam. "Spam is the No. 1 problem out there today, and we're working hard on it."

"Having a background in software technical writing has been an asset as a manager," said Sullivan. "As I moved up, I began managing writers and my technical writing experience has really helped, in terms of understanding the issues and problems facing the writers.

"Technical writers often feel undervalued and isolated from the other engineering groups working on a project," he explained. "It's always difficult to be at the tail end of the engineering process – and writing up the manuals and instructions on how to use the software is the last step. Everybody else can be late and miss deadlines, but they expect the writers to still meet the original deadline," Sullivan said.

"Also, the software engineers are typically working under very tight deadlines and they often have difficulty explaining the technical side of things to the writers," he said. "This spam issue is a perfect example. Everybody wants this problem solved and they're willing to pay us today for a solution, so the deadline pressure is tremendous."
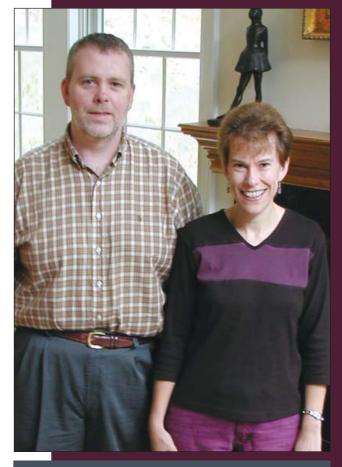
Sullivan's approach to the proverbial squeeze on technical writers is to get the engineers to include the writers early on in the design process. "Very often, certain pieces of the product are completed well before it's ready to ship. We try to get our writers involved on those pieces early, to avoid a big crunch at the end."

Enrolling in MCC's Software Technical Writing Program turned out to be pivotal to Sullivan's career, even though it didn't appear to be all that crucial at the time. "I wouldn't be where I am today without Middlesex," he said.

"As a young twenty-something, I didn't know it was going to be such a strategic move. All I knew was that I didn't want to teach, and no one wanted to hire me," said Sullivan, laughing. "Twenty years later, it looks like it was a pretty good decision."

For information about MCC's Software Technical Writing Program, call 781-280-3660 or visit the college website at http://careertraining.middlesex.mass.edu/stwp. Information about MCC Distance Education courses is available by calling 781-270-3716 or via the Middlesex Interactive website at http://online.middlesex.mass.edu.

- Kathy Register

Both Ed Sullivan and Eileen Baird, of Carlisle, have enrolled at Middlesex at various stages in their careers

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