

Grace Hopper 2007

Mair Allen-Williams

Introduction

The Grace Hopper conference is not a traditional conference, rather it is “A Celebration of Women in Computing”. For many attendees, the fact that it is a technical event at which there are *queues* for the ladies is more exciting than any of the computing content. This year, 1400 women (and a small number of men) attended Grace Hopper 2007 in Orlando and at least one set of gents’ toilets was opened to ladies and the men directed elsewhere. With 1400 women representing diverse computing and career interests, the conference tracks were a hodgepodge of varied technical content, career advice and inspiration from technical women.

Pre-conference: WiML

The Women in Machine Learning conference is co-located with Grace Hopper, giving Grace Hopper attendees whose specific interest is in a machine learning an opportunity to attend a focused technical workshop in which both presenters and audience are women (there were around 70 of us). Two men attended this year—a 100% increase on last year. WiML would like to see more gender balance among the attendees, but all female speakers (although some of the speakers commented that they felt more comfortable presenting to a female audience).

During intense day we were presented with subjects such as Machine Learning in Space, Data Privacy, and Automatic Email Triage from over a dozen speakers. Regular breaks for injections of sugar and caffeine provided opportunities for conversation about issues of our respective schools as well as machine learning interests. During the final session of the day we discussed the future of the workshop—for example, there are problems getting speakers as they do not consider it a serious conference. Next year’s WiML will probably be co-located with NIPS. This final session also covered a number of women’s issues such as the best time in one’s career to have a baby (overwhelming conclusion from the women with children: there is no good time, do it anyway). It was an unusual and warming experience to find such a frank atmosphere of issues that many of us wonder about but never discuss.

Evenings: Poster Session, Banquet, Networking Event

Wednesday evening's poster session reminded me of nothing so much as a freshers' fair. The hall was filled with posters on a variety of subjects. Among the ones which caught my eye were: a learning program built on old mobile phone screens, changes in wikipedia editor profiles over the last few years, and a poster eye-catchingly titled "the mathematics of love". The posters remained up in the hall for the rest of the week, so that we could examine them in a less crowded atmosphere over breakfast or during coffee breaks (the snack buffets were in the same hall).

Thursday night was the banquet, punctuated by a series of (both male and female) speakers who had been asked for twenty words of advice. We listened to such profound advice as "always read your emails twice before sending" (curiously enough of all the wise advice, that is the one that has stuck in my mind). On Friday evening we attended the colourful networking event at Universal CityWalk, an opportunity to collect cake and freebies, and discuss careers with the Platinum Sponsors - IBM, Google, HP et al. These sessions I mainly spent with the girls from Southampton and it was fun to get to know each other better— more female contacts back in the lab!

Thursday: Women in Computing

Thursday's first session was a panel of three quite different women discussing their careers in computing and how they managed their work/life balances. The first speaker, a tiny and charming Philippino/Mexican woman also did a fascinating talk on her career in aerobatics (which is a similarly male-dominated area). The key points I took away from this session were to always aim for difficult things ("If I think something is doable—I won't do it. If it's impossible, I'll have a go". "I made a decision, that whenever I had a choice, I would do the most difficult thing"), and to apply technical skills to one's personal life, right down to creating a dating pipeline with associated spreadsheet ("... and I closed the deal. We were married recently"). Among many nuggets, I was interested to hear from Robin that when she decided to stop working to 1am and stick with more sane hours, she was surprised to find that she didn't lose any respect from her colleagues.

Other sessions on Thursday included a session on environmental issues ("speak up for your beliefs in your workplace"), suggesting ways in which workplaces can be changed if one applies a little imagination, and a panel of "Girl Geeks in High School" who told us about their experiences of classes and teachers—and irritating relatives! Audience questions focused particularly on issues such as the use of laptops in class and facebook. In general, throughout the conference the women emphasized the help they had had from mentors (one woman had even appointed herself a personal board of advisors). Among other issues, it is useful for women (and presumably men) with wavering self-confidence to be able to have open discussions with people who have been in the same place and to be reassured that everyone has the same worries and problems. Indeed, maintaining confidence in oneself was another theme which was emphasized during the conference.

Friday: Technical sessions

Friday was more focused on technical sessions most of which were not of direct interest to me, although I attended the morning's PhD Forum before popping back to my room—and falling asleep right through lunch. In the afternoon I buoyed myself up with cookies before going to the session on the oral histories project. This project follows the theme of inspiring and encouraging women in computing by collecting women's stories (as mp3, text transcript, and occasionally video) into an archive. Our own Wendy Hall is to be a part of this collection. This project caught the interest of the audience and there were several suggestions for extensions to the project. More about the project is available at <http://cs.southwestern.edu/CEOHP/index.html>.

Saturday and Sunday: Orlando

Saturday morning's technical talks were focused on careers within companies, and all of us from Southampton decided that rather than attend them we would take the day for tourism. After breakfast at the conference hotel, I took myself off to try and get a feel for Orlando and its people. Away from the hotels and lights, I saw a variety of neighbourhoods, lots of trees and water but no alligators and I didn't quite get as far as "Downtown Orlando" before returning to the lights of I-drive and our motel. On Sunday morning I attended part of a local church service which was very different from anything I've attended in the UK, and served excellent doughnuts.

Conclusions

The Grace Hopper "celebration of Women in Computing" is about much more than technical content. It is aimed at giving women in computing—academia or industry—a sense of solidarity and helping them to find support networks and the confidence to continue in their technical careers. The diversity of the attendees makes it impossible to provide focused computing talks to interest all; the value of the event is in the frank discussion of work and lifestyle issues which are of interest to all women. Essentially, the delight of the queues for the ladies!

The co-located Machine Learning workshop was also well thought out and I found much of the computer science content within it interesting and relevant to my work.

Links

- Grace Hopper: <http://gracehopper.org>
- Grace Hopper wiki: <http://community.anitaborg.org/wiki/index.php/Ghc2007>
- Machine learning workshop: <http://wimlworkshop.org>
- Oral histories project: <http://cs.southwestern.edu/CEOHP/index.html>
- Orlando: <http://www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0703/feature4/>