UW CSE 2015 Alumni Achievement Awards

CSE honored two extraordinarily accomplished alumni — Tim Paterson and Kevin Jeffay — during its June 12th graduation ceremony. UW CSE's Alumni Achievement Awards have two purposes: to celebrate alums such as Tim and Kevin, and to affirm to new graduates that they are joining a community of UW CSE alums who have changed the world.

Tim Paterson (B.S. ’78)
DOS Seals His Contribution to PC History

Tim Paterson's email address neatly unites his past and present — dosman@patersontech.com. It encapsulates his early claim to computer science fame and his current engineer's proclivity to tinker and design tools for his own everyday needs. If other people consider them useful and want to buy them, that adds to his gratification and mission to be of service.

Paterson was among the first UW computer science undergraduate alumni. His combination of programming and design talent, drive to fix problems, and luck to work for key organizations at the right time sealed his contribution to the explosive development of personal computers.

At the age of 24, as the only engineer at Seattle Computer Products, he took on a rush project to create an operating system for the company's new 16-bit computer system that he designed. He gave it the internal name of QDOS, for "quick and dirty operating system." In fall 1980 it went on the market under the name 86-DOS, aimed at computer manufacturers and companies like Microsoft.

Microsoft soon came knocking on Seattle Computer's door to license 86-DOS, then purchased the rights for a total outlay of $75,000. Paterson remained at his job, working on the underpinnings of the program. Ready for a bigger company, he joined Microsoft in May 1981 as employee #80. Only then did he learn the big secret — IBM was Microsoft's customer for 86-DOS. The PC was announced that August, and Paterson completed the DOS 1.0 and 1.1 upgrades. That helped seal the company's future as a software behemoth, and it ensconced Paterson as the original author of the world's most widely used program for the next two decades.

Paterson's UW and engineering roots go deep. His father was a '35 UW EE graduate who kept all kinds of parts and gadgets around the house, which led to frequent father-son tinkering projects. They ordered Heath Kits, and Paterson built a radio receiver and an oscilloscope he still keeps in his basement "museum," along with other stray parts from early creations.

Paterson's talents won him admission to the College of Engineering, and then to the CS department once undergraduate students were admitted to the newly created program. In this era, only grad students had access to the Sieg Hall computer room and a Sigma with a 5-MB hard drive. "I got a peek of it on a tour but never saw it again. Undergrads had to hike over to the computer center near Mercer Hall," he says. "In junior year a buddy and I bought a dial-in modem and IMSAI-8080 so we could program in our dorm."

It's no surprise Paterson graduated magna cum laude with the right mix of skills, smarts and creativity to design the operating system behind the PC revolution. Paterson left Microsoft just short of a year after his hire, returned briefly in 1988, and again in 1990 for an eight-year run working on Visual Basic. When he left, the value of his stock options enabled him to retire in good humor and high energy at age 42. "Doing okay," he calls it.

With a sound grasp of the joys of life beyond work and no captain of industry desires, he established Paterson Technology as a hobby outlet for building "gizmos" — both for creative satisfaction and practical use around his own home. He posts photos of his inventions on his website and offers them for sale to others looking for outside-the-box items for their otherwise unmet tech needs.

In retirement Paterson poured abundant passion into fun and geeky hobbies. For about 20 years he reveled in pro rally racing on twisty logging roads. After winning several regional competitions in the late 1990s, he competed on the national circuit for a few years, placing third Open Class in the 2001 national championship. "Just luck," he says. Paterson also admits to "rolling cars more times than I can count," at least once when his wife was his co-driver. From about 2000 to 2005 he turned his attention to combat robots, even competing in several BattleBot tournaments, a TV reality series broadcast on the Comedy Central cable channel.