

I wrote my first computer program when I was nine. It was a very simple program that consisted of a menu and the ability to perform basic calculator operations but the experience was enough to get me hooked. I wanted to know more about how computers operated and attempt new things that had not yet been done. While my early academic record may not reflect that same curiosity and thirst for knowledge, the skills I gained during my post-high school years enabled me to achieve some academic and professional success later in life. However, it is with great anticipation that Columbia's School of General Studies will recognize my passion for knowledge and academics and enable me to complete my educational goals that will lead to even greater professional success and satisfaction.

My high school years were characterized by listlessness. I enrolled in honors level science and math classes, but was too disinterested to put forth an honest effort. Part of my attitude toward school stemmed from my knowledge that my father, a single parent since I was one year old, could not pay for college. I was not resourceful enough to think of another way to finance higher education.

My primary interest during high school was computers. Writing programs and exploring the possibilities of computers was more fascinating and engaging than homework. After high school, I searched for a job that would allow me to work with computers. Much to my dismay, nobody was willing to hire me as a PC technician without actual job experience. Instead, I opted to get a job at Computer City as a sales representative with the intention of working my way into the technical department.

As an entry-level sales representative, I took the chance to expand my knowledge of PC operation and maintenance. I read books on the subject and soon everyone on the

sales floor were routing customers with technical questions to me. At first it was thrilling to be the technical authority on the sales floor, but I was not satisfied and sought greater challenges.

I thought college would be a better place to expand my knowledge and started part-time. Unfortunately, I was distracted because I had made the decision at the same time to move out of my father's house into one with a number of roommates. While I yearned for new opportunities, I lacked the focus and direction to make my time at school fruitful.

After a brief attempt, I decided simply to stop attending class. Ironically, at the same time I was able to move into a position as a technician with Computer City. This was my first foray into working as a computer professional and was a great learning experience. It was all very exciting and new, but once again I was not content. I needed a challenge and set the goal of becoming a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer. While most people in the industry were taking up to a year to get certified, I achieved mine in less than three months. Attaining the certification led to an opportunity working as a contractor with Microsoft on the Windows 2000 project.

My new job required a move from Denver, Colorado to Redmond, Washington. Microsoft was constantly working on new products that millions of consumers used and I was exhilarated to be a part of the team. Starting work with such high caliber people was intimidating and I hoped that I would be able to contribute in a meaningful way. Luckily, my colleagues were more than happy to help me along in my development and I soon found myself working with them during many 80-hour weeks. I had never before worked so hard and put myself so fully into a single endeavor. I also read as many technical

books as I could get my hands on and received guidance from more experienced coworkers on what to study. My studies started me thinking about the limitations of computers and how they might be overcome. I thought that artificial intelligence would be the best solution and wanted to study the field. I knew school would be the best way to learn about artificial intelligence, but I was too consumed by work to get started.

After fifteen months of consistent, serious work, we finished Windows 2000 and capped it off with a large celebration. While “Bill” had spoken to us multiple times during our grueling development cycle, his speech at the release party was very gratifying. It was obvious that we had completed a major project and the industry would stand up and take notice.

With the release of Windows 2000, my contract at Microsoft was up and I decided to move back to Denver and apply my newly acquired skills in the consulting industry. My background with Microsoft gave me the chance to work on many interesting projects. I was the lead consultant on many Windows migrations while gaining more sophisticated skills in other areas of information technology. In addition to my technical development, I gave several presentations at various seminars attended by potential clients and coworkers on the challenges presented by Windows migrations. Working as a consultant with new clients and delivering seminars in front of many people gave me a new-found confidence that previously had eluded me.

My work on large, nation-wide networks created a tremendous amount of pressure and one night in particular stands out. I had to work late to fix a problem that affected over one hundred sites Nation-wide. I spent over an hour nervously trying to fix the problem before everything came back on-line. Afterward, I started to think about

school. I came to a decision right then and there: I would go back to school and attack my studies with the same focus and dedication I found during my time at Microsoft and as a consultant.

Nervous about my ability to get back into academics after such a long break, I started school on a part time basis. I found that my focus and the ability to learn on my own made a difference. The skills I had picked up during my career enabled me to earn excellent grades. Then another opportunity came knocking. I was offered the chance to work with a new company in a lead role on their product development. While this wasn't furthering my studies, the chance to work on a new product and influence its design was too good to pass up. Although I was working tirelessly at my new job, I was able to continue taking a few classes and kept my grades high.

Over the course of approximately two years, the company realized multiple product releases, which required many working weekends. Sadly, our efforts were not enough and the startup to which I had dedicated myself closed its doors permanently. I was devastated by the company's failure and cursed myself for spending too much time on work and not enough on college. I promised myself that I would put a renewed focus on school, but I now owned a house and had to take care of my financial responsibilities. I found work again as a consultant developing a new system for Air Force Space Command. I concentrated on getting my finances in order so I could pursue my goal of finishing college.

After my project with Air Force, I began my current position as a Senior Research and Development Engineer at McAfee. While my work is very interesting, I often find myself thinking about artificial intelligence. I am certain that Columbia's School of

General Studies is the best place for pursuing my interest in artificial intelligence. GS' focus on non-traditional students who have work experience and current jobs makes it a perfect fit. My academic career may be incomplete, but I strongly believe that in between traditional coursework, I continued my education through work experience and self- education. Until now, the opportunity to pursue my education in a traditional way did not present itself so I created a way to incorporate education into my life non-traditionally. While I view my professional life as a success, it is not enough: I long for academic success as well.

My desire is to attend Columbia's School of General Studies in the fall of 2005, which will enable me to achieve my future goals. Once I complete my bachelor's in computer science, I intend to work on my Ph.D. in computer science with a focus on artificial intelligence. Two groups at Columbia focus on areas I wish to pursue: Tony Jebara's machine learning group, and Kathy McKeown's natural language processing group. A specific goal of mine is to become a contributing member to either, or both, of these groups and garner the experience and knowledge I seek in the field of artificial intelligence.

Given the chance, I am confident that I will be a credit to Columbia and will work as hard academically as I have professionally. I know I possess what it takes to succeed at Columbia's School of General Studies and I believe after reading my story; you will come to the same conclusion.