

## THE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Roxanne Butterfield by Chauncy Rucker  
at the 2009 CSUN Conference, March 17-21, Los Angeles, CA

**RUCKER:** So, Roxanne, tell me how it is that you got so interested in and so involved in the whole field of disability and let me know about how you got into the various companies you've dealt with in terms of having product for people with disabilities.

**BUTTERFIELD:** Ok, Chauncy. When I was growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one of my mother's cousins was a man with cerebral palsy and Gene could not walk or talk so that other people could understand him, but he was a very bright man. However, he would probably be 85 or 90 years old today. So when he was growing up, he was not allowed to go to school. Gene had no control over his hands or his mouth for talking. His family gave him a manual typewriter and he taught himself how to use his toe and his foot and he drew pictures with the manual typewriter. And if you're old enough to know how a manual typewriter works...

**RUCKER:** (Chuckles.)

**BUTTERFIELD:** ...to draw space, space, space, space, x, x, x, x, asterisk, asterisk, exclamation point, exclamation point, new line, space, space, space, space and so on and line things up and make something. He started out creating little animals, went on to bigger pictures. The last work that he did was a mural of the family farm.

**RUCKER:** Hmm.

**BUTTERFIELD:** It consisted of about 16 or 24 pieces of paper that, when taped together, visually lined up and he drew his family farm. He was not allowed to go to school because he could not walk, could not talk, could not feed himself. When we were raised, he was held up as one of our role models in our family because if Gene could do this, why can't you do that. So that was part of my family upbringing.

I'm a Speech Pathologist by training and I worked in several different school districts in Wisconsin. The last position I had, I worked with children with severe disabilities and that was about the time when the augmentative communication devices were being produced in a somewhat portable size. I wanted to learn how to use those devices so that my students could be trained or learn how to use them so they could better communicate when voice output was so exciting as a new technology over just a paper communication board.

Along that avenue of deciding to learn about augmentative communication devices, the Apple computer became popular in education and there was something called an Echo Speech Synthesizer board that gave the Apple computer a voice. And the school that I worked for happened to have several Apple II computers and I raised money in the community to buy assistive technology devices, things that would help me teach the students. So I went out and raised some money and bought some Echo Speech Synthesizers and an Adaptive Firmware Card and a Unicorn keyboard and a Power Pad and something called a Key Port 717 which was one of my favorite all-time devices. I bought a Muppet keyboard, I bought all those single switches and a switch interface. I would spend time after school teaching myself how to use things and then I'd have breakfast meetings for my teachers at the school. I would give them breakfast and we would have 15-minute trainings and I would teach them one thing about the computer and how it could benefit our kids. And in my role as a speech pathologist and the AAC person in the school, fulltime, then I would get called over the PA system to go to Mrs. Jones' room and set up the computer for Matthew. Then I'd be interrupted to go to the next classroom and set things up. So I was very, very busy with that. In that quest of learning how to use the computer to train AAC devices, I also wanted to learn about the AAC devices themselves. And I happened to run across an advertisement by the Don Johnston Company in Lake Zurich, Illinois. At that time, Don Johnston's Company sold AAC devices for Prentke-Romich, Phonic Ear, Cannon, ACS – which is a company that's long gone.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** And they did a Saturday workshop. So I could take my Saturday, drive for about an hour and for ten dollars, I could get an all day hands-on workshop, lunch included...

**RUCKER:** (Laughs.)

**BUTTERFIELD:** ...and just have a wonderful experience. So I met Don Johnston and another wonderful person who worked for him at the time named Paula Kwit. From that knowledge, I became much more interested in the equipment. That year, I also learned about Closing the Gap as an organization. In those years, the mid 80s, not only did they have their newspaper, they ran summer institutes and we could earn college grad credits to learn about the technology. To make a short story here, I took a couple of summer classes. I met the people from Closing the Gap such as Bud & Dolores Hagen, Maryann Hardy, Connie Kneip, Sharon – I don't remember her last name. We became friends. They said "you must come to the Closing the Gap conference in the fall." I said, "I'd love to, however, I have no money." They said, "Well, if you can get here, you can sleep on the floor in our room." And I did. (Laughs.) My superintendent at the school gave me permission, paid leave-days to go to the conference, but said, "Don't you dare come back and say you quit." I went to the conference. I walked through the exhibit hall and was overwhelmed by the noise, the people, the excitement, the technology. Everything was so new. And as I'm overwhelmed and I'm by myself, I looked up and I saw a friendly face, somebody I knew and it was Paula Kwit from Don Johnston. She asked how I was doing. She remembered me from the Saturday class and we talked and she said, "Would you like a job?" And I said, "Yes."

**RUCKER:** (Laughs.)

**BUTTERFIELD:** (Laughs.) So I had to go back and leave my district. But anyway, in January, 1986, I left teaching and went to work for the Don Johnston Company as a AAC sales rep, developing their catalogue with computer products. Then I became the Director of Product Development for the Don Johnston Company. We hired programmers. We designed some very simple Apple IIE software, "Join the Circus", "Make It Happen", "Make It In Time", very simple cause-and-effect things. I worked on other projects like the very first word prediction program Predict It that was authored by Paul Schweda and Judy McDonald for the Apple IIE and that was the very first word prediction program. Anyway, a wide variety of software. I worked for the Don Johnston Company for 16-1/2 years in a variety of positions. One of the job tasks that I had over most of the years

was to work with third party companies, other companies who had produced software or products that are carried in the Don Johnston catalogue. So oftentimes, I would get phone calls from people saying, "I have an idea for a product." Well, I can't produce every idea.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** But I also got phone calls from people who said, "I have a product. What would it take to get in your catalogue?" And so I met Jo Myer who at that time was a special education teacher during the day and at night she would program on her computer. If you have a chance to meet Jo, she's a very dynamite lady. She was producing on the Apple IIE some very simple cause-and-effect software for the students in her class. Of course, everybody who saw it said, "Isn't this wonderful!" It was very engaging with music, animation. Wonderful, exciting technology back in those days.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** So I would work with Jo and other people, other companies such as Mark Horn from MarbleSoft, Jim and Jean Slater with another company. What would we need to do to put their products in a national catalogue. I worked with them in the background in how to produce it, how to package it, how to price it. So that was part of my job at Don Johnston. I had a wonderful career with Don and Ruth and everybody there. I met a lot of people, traveled to the U.K. and Paris and London and other places. I had a wonderful career. And after a while, you get to a time when you know it's time to try something different. And Jo Myer from Soft Touch said, "Roxanne, we need you. Would you come and work for us?" So I extended my family, became an alumnus of Don Johnston and went to work for SoftTouch as the Marketing Director and Sales Director and Professional Development Director. I worked with Jo and SoftTouch for 3-1/2 years. Then I got a similar phone call from Jim and Jean Slater saying, "We need you. Why don't you come and work with us?"

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** So I decided it was time. While working at Don Johnston, I worked with a wide variety of student ability, from cause-and-effect software through learning disability, higher-end student learning with

CoWriter, Write Out Loud. Going back to work with Jo at SoftTouch was going back to my roots of working with kids with more severe cognitive disabilities in the early emergent learning, which is very exciting to see, to awaken the learner inside.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** Working with Slater Software, we focus on literacy and how to get the kids who have been left behind in reading and writing. How do we get them to engage with language, with words and move them into the literate world, whether it's a literacy experience or enabling them to do some reading and doing writing. And so that's what I do today, is work with the Slater Company, with Picture It and PixWriter, our primary products.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** And I teach people how to use the products which are very easy to use. I can teach you in five minutes. But how to really implement them, the tools that are available.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** To enable students to be able to read and to write. I'm concluding my 24<sup>th</sup> year, I think, in the industry.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum. Great career!

**BUTTERFIELD:** It's a long one.

**RUCKER:** (Laughs.) And speak a little bit...I think there's a kind of uniqueness about Slater and what they do and the kind of niche they cover.

**BUTTERFIELD:** Well, I'll try to figure out how to differentiate it. The programs for the Slater Software products, Picture It and Pix Writer, were designed by Jean Slater, who is a speech pathologist working in the schools with kids with a wide variety of disabilities and abilities.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** And trying as a speech pathologist trying to connect the kids to literacy, to reading and to writing in language development because listening is receptive language and speaking is expressive language and reading is receiving language and writing is expressive language.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** So there is a natural combination there, working with the kids. So she was making materials to get kids to read by drawing pictures above words. The short story is she went home one day and said there's gotta be an easier way to do this and her husband Jim who was a programmer said, "Tell me what you want" and he programmed it and that became Picture It. Picture It is what we call a teacher's tool or educator's tool to create picture-assisted reading materials. That means our program instantly puts pictures with words so that students who can't read just text alone can use the pictures as clues to the words. The next program after getting reading going was PixWriter and that program again pairs pictures with words in a very simple on-computer-screen word bank program that enables students who can't pick up a pencil and write or who could pick up a pencil and write but it's so long and arduous to produce anything that they can't focus on the expression, the written expression.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** So PixWriter enables students to produce authentic writing, whether it's a simple choice-making task or a list-writing task, all the way up to writing reports, taking tests and so on.

**RUCKER:** Any question I should have asked you that I didn't?

**BUTTERFIELD:** Have I regretted a moment? No. Have I enjoyed the profession that I've been in for these years? Yes, I've enjoyed it immensely. Mostly, I think, the Assistive Technology industry has been the collaboration between companies. Not only do they sometimes help each other, such as, "I have an idea for a product, but it's not my area of expertise. Here's an idea, take it and go with it", but also helping each other build the industry and build the market. And friendships, lifelong friendships.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum.

**BUTTERFIELD:** Not only with vendors, but with customers and sometimes with families. Sometimes being in the vendor realm we are a little bit removed from some of the families but some of the families we've gotten to know, as well. So it's been a very rewarding career and I'll probably continue, someday when I retire, to be involved in some way.

**RUCKER:** Um-hum. Thank you.

**BUTTERFIELD:** You're welcome. My pleasure.

**RUCKER:** Why don't you come and work for me? I don't have any money, but all it takes is just to ask you, apparently, to come and work for me.

**BUTTERFIELD:** (Laughs.) Frequently, that happens, and I do things for free. (Laughs.)