

17.10 Pamela Jean Wisniewski: Strength and Resilience

Editor's introduction: Pam Wisniewski (like Telle Whitney and Sue Black) loses a parent at a young age. She and Rane Johnson-Stempson both suffer abuse in their homes when they are children. The two women's accounts are very difficult to read, as we want to go back in time and rescue the little girls. Almost all of our writers tell us about their little girl shadows who follow them every day. We cannot understand the woman without knowing about the little shadow girl. Accordingly, Pam's description of her childhood completes her story. Without Pam's description, we also would not understand the depth of the post-traumatic stress incurred from her adult computing life. Pam says that the adult computing scars are worse than the childhood scars. Like Katie Siek, Pam ties her personal life and her desire to help others to her research. Pam has to fight for the recognition that her research field (HCI) deserves. In HCI, she finds her professional goal: to maximize the benefits of technology while minimizing its harm. Read the last section (the last two paragraphs) of Pam's story very carefully. Pam writes one of the most (if not, the most) stirring appeals to our CS community that I've ever read.

Trigger warning: *This story discusses childhood sexual abuse. Reader discretion is advised.*

Strong. This is the word that has followed me all of my life. It has been used as a compliment, a reason to withhold help and support, and as an insult. Strong in the face of adversity. Strong enough to do it all by myself. Strong-willed and strong-headed. As a woman in computing, strength has been a necessity, but it is in my vulnerability, which has fostered empathy, that I have achieved my success. So, here is my story.

17.10.1 Overcoming Childhood Adversity

I was born almost two months premature and weighed only three pounds and six ounces at birth. I stayed in the hospital for weeks with jaundice, named "Girl Karr," until they later penciled in the name "Pamela Jean" on my birth certificate. My Mom and Dad were smokers, and by the age of eight, my Dad died of lung cancer. We were dirt poor. My Mom was left alone with three girls, ages eight, fifteen, and twenty-six. The stress put her into a diabetic coma, and we thought that my oldest sister was going to have to raise us. Luckily, my mom pulled through, and unluckily, she met a new man... His name was John.

John moved us to Mississippi, where we lived in a fifth-wheel trailer that we pulled behind our truck. He was a smooth-talking car salesman who liked my middle sister and me more than a grown man should. I endured John and Mississippi for five long years and five days. Being half-Chinese in Mississippi meant being called "Ching-Chong" by the kids in school and being asked if we ate dogs. Yet,

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being with John meant that school was the only safe place for me to be. I excelled at every subject and earned straight As, as expected of the bright, Asian girl.

My first experience with modern-day technology was when John hid his new video camera in the laundry basket in the bathroom to record me taking a shower. I caught him. Finally, recorded evidence of the constant abuse that I could use to get rid of him and protect myself. I was fourteen years old, and I was strong. However, my Mom wasn't. She said that he was sick and needed help, so she stayed with him and sent me to live with my oldest sister. At the age of sixteen, I moved in with my middle sister. When I was a senior in high school, I lived on my own, worked at a Jiffy Lube, and graduated as Salutatorian of my senior class. I was strong, but I was alone.

17.10.2 The Era of AOL Instant Messenger

I had a love-hate relationship with technology growing up and was a late bloomer. In junior high, we had an Apple-compatible computer, where I played "Jeopardy" and "Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?" In ninth grade, I got an electronic typewriter. In tenth grade, I needed my boyfriend Tom to come over to show me how to get a file off a floppy disk so I could turn in my homework. After we broke up, I learned how to type by chatting with strangers in AOL chat rooms and instant messenger. As a teen, I was lonely and searched the Internet for love and support. I gave a random guy my address, and he sent me a mug with my name on it. Years later, I found out he was arrested for murder. By my senior year in high school, I learned how to do newspaper layouts on the computers at my school. I wanted to be a journalist, but at the career shadow day, the career mentor joked that we better have parents who loved us because we wouldn't get rich and be able to support ourselves in journalism. I decided right then and there not to be a journalist. However, computing was not even a blip on my radar at the time.

17.10.3 From Accounting to Information Systems

When I started college, I declared accounting as my major, mostly because people told me that I was meticulous and would be good at it. I had no mentorship. I quickly learned that I hated accounting and that debits and credits were backward from what I thought they should be in my head. However, I was already halfway done with a business degree, and I could not afford to switch majors to another college. My boyfriend Ryan was a computer engineering major, so I switched my major to information systems to take "Introduction to Programming in Java" with him. What I didn't know is that it was the weed-out class, and most people who passed it had taken it before. I also didn't know what the hell an object or method

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was, or a loop, and I certainly did not expect to learn what recursion was to calculate Fibonacci numbers. I won't lie; I had my boyfriend, who had been coding DOS batch files since elementary school, do a large portion of the recursion assignment for me. But I did everything else myself and earned an A in the class.

I went from struggling to striving. I became the President of the student chapter of the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP) and earned my bachelor's and M.S. in Decision and Information Science in four years and a semester. I graduated summa cum laude from the University of Florida (UF) with a 4.0 in graduate school and a 3.97 in my bachelor's degree. The only "B" I received was in a class called "Writing and Love," which was ironically reflective of the tumultuous intimate relationships I had during college. Having multiple unhealthy relationships, including one with my college professor, who was 19 years my elder, I shined academically but scraped by personally. Working while putting myself through college, I moved ten times, often necessitated by a breakup. At the age of 22, the same year I graduated college, I was diagnosed with herpes. I thought my life was over. The good news was that I secured a high-paying job as a programmer analyst at a financial services company and had saved up enough money to buy my first home. I was hopeful that my new career would provide me with the financial stability and security I needed to turn my life around.

Yet, I found out that being a programmer analyst wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Sure, I learned full-stack .NET development and became a wizard at third normal form, SQL Server, and making Crystal Reports. Still, my mostly male co-workers more than once mistook me for a receptionist and asked me to get them coffee, or they wanted to date me. No one had told me that being a woman in information technology would be like this. Then, after a year and a half, my company downsized and fired me. On top of that, in 2004, hurricanes Charlie, Frances, Ivan, and Jean ravaged Tampa Bay and destroyed my home. The security I had worked so hard for was gone.

17.10.4 From Information Systems to Human-Computer Interaction

Every dark cloud has a silver lining. I was able to use the insurance money from my house to go back to get my Ph.D. In my research statement, I said that I wanted to study Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) so that I could serve God and help people. After applying to top universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Georgia Tech, and the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) was the only university that accepted my application. At the time, HCI was still an emerging field, so I started the Ph.D. program in business information systems while working as a systems developer for a medical consulting company.

Charlotte is where I began to find myself. I started a non-profit organization called Charlotte H for people living with herpes and human papilloma virus (HPV). Born from a Yahoo! Group, we gained over 3,000 members in less than five years and received national recognition.² This was my first foray into online communities and social media, and I was passionate about using technology for good. Yet, in my Ph.D. studies, the information systems field was still preoccupied with proving the business value of information technology and disproving the productivity paradox (boring!). So, while failing my qualifying exams was devastating at the time, in retrospect, it was the push I needed to change course. I switched my Ph.D. track to software information systems with a concentration in HCI. After all, I cared more about people than I cared about technology.

My dissertation was on managing interpersonal boundaries within social networking sites and the potential privacy threats that can occur when one tries to connect socially with others online. The topic was inspired by my experience running Charlotte H and meeting people who had socially isolated themselves for 5–20+ years because they were too ashamed of disclosing their diagnoses to intimate partners, friends, or family members. I realized that the anonymity of the Internet could be used to help people, though I also saw the dark side of how it could also be used to prey on those who were vulnerable. I saw the Internet as a double-edged sword that had the potential to protect and to harm, depending on how it was used. As such, my career goal became to optimize the benefits of technology use while minimizing the negative impacts.

17.10.5 A Winding Path toward the Tenure-Track

Like everything else, I found my husband online. I met Mike, who was a solutions architect for embedded systems, toward the end of my Ph.D. studies. My first message to him on Match.com started with, “Maybe we would be too geeky together...” And, believe me, we were totally geeky together. Yet, soon after we got married, he became very sick and had to go on long-term disability. That meant that I accepted the first job offer I got, so we would have health insurance to pay for his high-cost medical treatments. We moved to Alabama, even though I knew that the Deep South and I never got along. After a semester of being miserable in a tenure-track job in a town where all I heard was, “Ya’ll ain’t from around here, are you?,” we packed our bags for a postdoc opportunity at Penn State. Living on a fifth of the salary we had when we first got married, I had to be strong again—this time to support myself and my chronically ill husband to climb our way out of debt so that we could have a future and start a family.

2. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/success/sns-health-herpes-healing-story.html>.

At the end of my postdoc, I was interviewing for tenure-track jobs, first pregnant and then later with a two-month-old baby. I had to ask for pumping breaks and was continually exhausted. Professionally, I was doing well. I won consecutive Best Paper awards and my h-index was climbing. I started my tenure-track job at the University of Central Florida (UCF) when my daughter Eva was ten months old (Figure 17.9).

17.10.6 Is Human–Computer Interaction Really Computer Science?

Being in a College of Engineering and Computer Science as a woman in HCI is not for the faint of heart. From being told that HCI isn't really computer science to being asked where my algorithm was, I learned early on that HCI researchers must be evangelists who constantly have to prove the value and complexity of human-centered computing and user-centered design. As a woman on the “softer side” of computer science, it was imperative that I not only match but also outperform my colleagues who were from more technical fields, even when given fewer resources. I was determined to succeed, which did not fit well with people's typical stereotype of the subservient Asian woman. Maybe that is why more than once someone



Figure 17.9 Eva Wisniewski (Pam's daughter) proudly holds a picture of her Mom published in a magazine highlighting her accomplishments as an early career Computer Science scholar. Source: Image courtesy of Pamela Wisniewski.

at my institution has called me “strong-headed” or “counterculture.” While gaining national and international recognition for my work, “some [faculty on the college-level tenure and promotion committee] were not convinced [my] record [was] truly outstanding and substantially exceed[ed] the CECS P&T minimums for early promotion.” Nevertheless, by a majority vote, I was awarded early tenure and promotion in 2020. The news was bittersweet as I was caretaking my mother on her deathbed. Looking back, I am thankful to UCF because it pushed me to be my best and to work harder than I would have without a level of adversity.

17.10.7 Promoting Adolescent Online Safety through Resilience

A “scholar activist” is someone committed to scholarly research and scientific rigor but equally committed to their situations of origin and is passionate about making the world a better place through their learned experience. Coming full circle, I built my research career around promoting the online safety and well-being of youth. This includes helping teens be more resilient against cyberbullying and sexual predation risks online. Given my tumultuous childhood, resilience-based approaches that help youth thrive in the face of adversity are near and dear to my heart. Importantly, however, I frame my research through the lens of social-ecological resilience—the support systems (e.g., family, friends, and community) in which youth are embedded—rather than viewing resilience as an immutable trait of certain individuals. That way, if an individual fails to thrive, it isn’t necessarily a personal failure as much as a failure of the systems of support surrounding that individual. Resilience is not simply proving an individual’s strength in the face of adversity; instead, resilience is building stronger support systems and communities around people to protect and empower them. Strength in the face of adversity should be a virtue, not a necessity for basic survival.

17.10.8 Supporting Women in Computing

Along that same vein, my advice to those in our profession is that we should not expect women in computing to have to be individually “strong” and resilient in the face of adversity to thrive in our field. The field of computing could greatly benefit from more gentleness, empathy, vulnerability, and support. Technology can be a great equalizer that levels disparity and brings social justice and equity. However, if we preclude those who bring in those characteristics, then our field will remain exclusionary and stunted. We need to celebrate diversity not only based on gender and race but also diversity of thought and in consideration of the personal history of each individual.

This isn’t my entire life story as many parts are co-owned by others and are not mine alone to tell. I am a survivor of childhood abuse, but the post-traumatic stress

from being a woman in computing has outweighed my childhood scars. When I could have used care, compassion, and a sense of belonging, I was often made to feel like an outsider. The sad thing is I know I am not alone and that there are many women—many people—who were not as fortunate to make it in this career as far as I have. Additionally, those of us who are still at the table have had to be stronger than we needed to be, which is often worn as a badge of honor, when it should be a wake-up call for our field to do better and be more inclusive. I joined ACM-W as the Chair of the Rising Star Award³ committee to celebrate early career women whose research has had a significant impact on the computing discipline. Women in computing should be celebrated, but not just when we achieve great success. We should be celebrated when we struggle, when we ask for help, and even when we are “strong-headed.” After all, I’ve never met a woman in computing who didn’t have to be strong.

3. <https://women.acm.org/awards/rising-star-award/>.