## World's Largest Gathering of Technical Women

# HIGH ON TECH

Women in tech gathered to investigate the theme, "Creating Technology for Social Good." **BY COREY LEIGH LATISLAW**

This year, the Grace Hopper Conference was held in Tucson, AZ, from September 30 to October 3, beginning on a record-breaking 101°F day. Since its inception in 1994, the Anita Borg Institute and other academic, corporate, and government sponsors have funded this conference to "bring the research and career interests of women in computing to the forefront" [1]. As the "world's largest gathering of technical women" [2], it has positively affected the careers of thousands of technical women like me.

Although I thoroughly expected sponsorship and enrollment to be down in these hard economic times, the commitment to recruiting and retaining women hasn't waned. Registration had to be cut off at 1,608 participants (up 11 percent over last year) [3], and the positive energy was palpable. Big-name technology sponsors from colleges, labs, and industry were out in full force – despite budget cuts and layoffs – and dominated the exhibition space, actively recruiting and conducting on-site interviews.

Despite the increased number of participants, the conference was expertly organized and flowed smoothly. Very rarely did I wait in a line for anything, including food or bathrooms (partly because of the temporary conversion of men's bathrooms). The course content was carefully selected, and the speakers were engaging, which was clearly evident by several standing-room-only sessions.

Although the scheduling allowed only 15 minutes between sessions, participants had plenty of time to network before catching the next presentation. The conference also had many on-site amenities, including a cybercafé, nursing mother's room, free WiFi, and child care.

The conference theme, "Creating Technology for Social Good," wove throughout the fabric of the workshops, sessions, technical presentations, keynotes, poster sessions, and panels. The offerings were organized into several targeted tracks, running concurrently, and focused on issues related to academia, industry, and women at various stages of their career. I attended industry-track offerings that applied directly to my interests and career goals, including privacy and social software, entrepreneurism, individual contributions vs. management track, understanding and coping with Imposter Syndrome, building effective software teams, finding technical mentorship and sponsorship, developing sustainable technologies, and understanding why women leave high tech.

A code sprint to improve the Systers [4] mailing list infrastructure was organized just weeks before the conference. Jennifer Redman, one of the organizers for the event, expressed it best:

*The primary goal was to provide a positive hands-on introduction to the Systers open source development community. The original task list was a starting point to help foster new development ideas, in*



**Figure 1: Keynote speaker Megan Smith.**

*addition to fixing some existing problems. During the sprint, we completed several documentation tasks, made good progress on one particularly pesky bug, had several women commit to future development, and now have the first version of a new app to help manage our testing/release cycles. We were fortunate to have Terri Oda, a senior Mailman developer and a Syster, attend. She helped facilitate discussion on Mailman 3 and searchable archives. We had approx 30 women participate in the code sprint, and everyone had fun.*

Arguably the biggest advantage to attending this conference was networking with other women in technology. Throughout the conference you could meet a CEO one minute and an individual contributor the next and talk with equal ease to both. The CONNECT program allowed attendees to create profiles and networking goals before the conference, then a volunteer scanned conference badges to make a "connection." Through this program, I will be able to keep up easily with my new contacts.

Although it can be hard at times for women to stay in the tech industry, this conference helps combat, as Kirrily Robert [5] put it, "the death by a thousand paper cuts." The conference allows us to forge lasting relationships, learn from the bright, technical women around us, reflect on where we've been and where we are going, and open our minds to unconsidered possibilities. I hope to see you in Atlanta for 2010! ■

### INFO

[1] Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing: *http://www.gracehopper.org/*

[2] Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology: *http://www.anitaborg.org/initiatives/ghc/*

[3] GHC News: *http://gracehopper.org/2009/news/grace-hopper-celebration-of-women-in-computing-announces-record-breaking-turnout/*

[4] Systers: *http://www.systers.org/*

[5] "Standing Out in the Crowd" by Kirrily Robert: *http://atlantalinuxfest.org/node/108/*

[6] Conference notes: *http://community.anitaborg.org/wiki/index.php/Ghc2009*

[7] Twitter stream: *http://search.twitter.com/search?q=ghc09*