

## UPSILON PI EPSILON

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### Knuth Draws Record Crowd to

# UPE National Convention

#### GREETINGS!

This post follows hot on the heels of the UPE (International Honor Society for the Computing and Information Disciplines) National Convention, held during SIGCSE 2011 in Dallas in early March. An exciting time it was! A brief synopsis follows. But, first ...

#### ACM International Collegiate Programming Contest

UPE has been a proud sponsor of the ACM International Collegiate Programming Contest since the first World Finals in 1977. This year's competition was

scheduled for early March in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, but as the world spotlight turned on the political tensions in Cairo at the end of January, it became increasingly obvious that the Finals could not be held as scheduled. Kudos goes to ICPC Executive Director, William Poucher, for his quick ability to relocate the contest at the end of May, in Orlando, Florida, USA.

#### 2011 UPE Convention

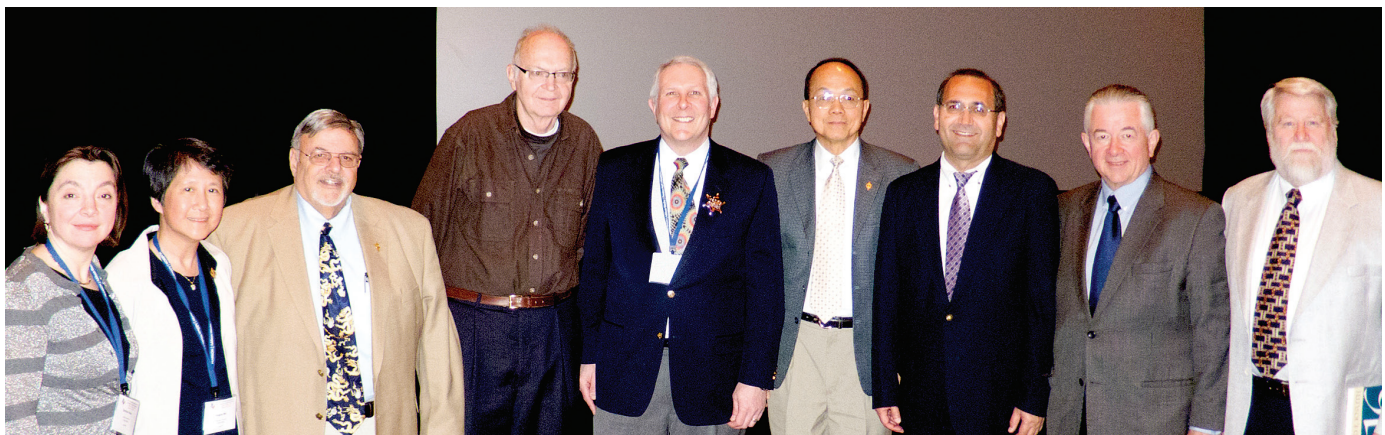
The UPE National Convention was held during the Friday lunch slot of the SIGCSE Technical Symposium and an estimated 500 people attended it. The business portion of the meeting was kept brief in order



to allow maximum time for an address from Abacus Award winner Donald Knuth, to whom credit is certainly due for the record crowd.

The meeting consisted of the following items.

- Financial report from UPE Executive Director Orlando Madrigal (Synopsis: health excellent, investments rebounding, approximately 250 more new inductees this year vs. last year);
- Report of scholarships and awards given in 2010 (see the December 2010 Inroads);
- New chapters chartered in the last year (Saint Peter's College, University of Wyoming, Gonzaga University, University of San Diego, Marymount University), bringing us to 251 chapters;
- Chapter activity reports (presentations from 9 chapters in a miraculous 19 minutes: Abilene Christian University, College of Charleston, California State University -- Chico, DePaul University, Florida International Uni-



versity, Kettering University, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Southwestern University, St. Joseph’s College, NY);

- Farewell to longtime Executive Council member Robert Roggio, whose term expired at the end of the convention;
- Election of a new Executive Council member (Angela Wu, American University);
- Presentation of the Abacus Award to Donald E. Knuth, Professor Emeritus of The Art of Computer Programming at Stanford University, followed by an informal 50-minute interactive session with the audience, “All Your Questions Answered”.

Chapter reports trended toward more outreach than usual – to middle school and high school students, to general community service, and to university service. These were highly commendable and inspirational activities indeed!

### All Your Questions Answered

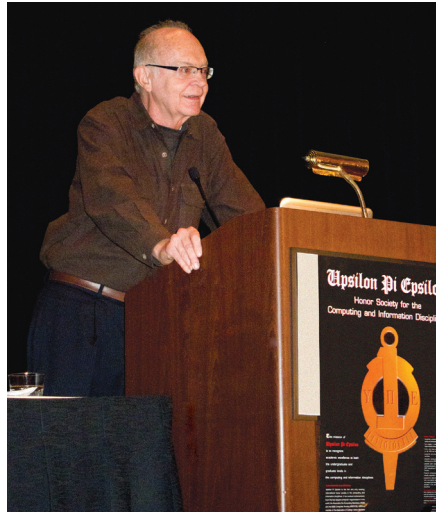
UPE’s most prestigious award is the Abacus Award, for

“an individual who has gained international renown in the profession, and over a period of several years has provided extensive support and leadership for student-related activities in the computing and information disciplines.”

The award recognizes the role of the abacus as an early personal digital assistant. The awardee receives a specially engraved abacus. In receiving the award, Prof. Knuth said he would keep it by his desk, admonishing, “Never trust The Cloud”. He stated his approval of the font used in the inscription, which you may safely assume was not a dot matrix. He also received an honorary membership in UPE.

Questions from the audience spanned quite a range, from his inspiration in writing the book, *3:16 Bible Texts Illuminated* [1] to his opinions on seventh graders having cell phones. When asked whether he prefers “emacs” or “vi”, he pondered a moment then replied, “The only thing I learned about ‘vi’ was how to quit”.

When asked how to get by without reading email in today’s world, he admitted that although he stopped reading email on Jan. 1, 1990, he does need an email address now and then, to fill in a form. Regarding his most important educational influence before the age of twelve, he credited the teacher who taught him to diagram sentences.



Knuth confessed having driven to Chico, California, a few years ago to see the movie “Helvetica”, whose topic is what you think it is. On computing challenges in the future, he said it would always be a challenge to verify our computer programs. Regarding the many distractions facing today’s youth, including cell phones, television, and text messaging, he feels that interruptions and a short attention span are not compatible with anything in his whole life. He does find that certain background music helps him though, citing Bach. But, he does not own a television. He said he watched some TV in his hotel room, but was not convinced enough to buy one.

As to what we should be teaching our freshmen, he said that *everybody* should know a certain amount about computing (yes, he speaks fluent *italics*). He also said about one person in fifty has grown up to be a “geek like me”, so we should make sure we capture that 2% of the student body.

His greatest success? He cited his two most recently published books, *Fun and*

*Games* [2] and the long-awaited *Volume 4A* [3]. He said he finished them both on the same day, 6 December 2010. What a day! After explaining the theme of the papers on fun and games, he also mentioned having written an article published in *Mad Magazine* as a youth. He may not have been still answering the original question.

A question about the future of Literate Programming may also very well have asked him his greatest frustration. He admits to being “totally biased” as he thinks it is “the best thing since sliced bread”. When he is in “teacher mode”, he thinks more clearly and makes fewer mistakes, because he is explaining it to somebody else. And yet, there must be some reason it hasn’t caught on – some people, or perhaps most people, don’t enjoy writing. He said there are 10,000 people who like Literate Programming as much as he does, but that is only 1% of all programmers.

As the meeting concluded on Friday, Prof. Knuth assured us that his break was ending, and writing for Volume 4B was to commence on Monday (14 March). Perhaps it is only a coincidence that he chose Einstein’s birthday for the launch. Or, perhaps because it was Pi Day? In any case, the countdown ticker for another eagerly awaited volume has begun. **Ir**

Cheers,  
... jp

#### References:

- [1] Knuth, Donald E. (1991). *3:16 : Bible Texts Illuminated*. A-R Editions, Inc., ISBN 978-0-89579-252-5.
- [2] Knuth, Donald E. (2010) *Selected Papers on Fun and Games*. Stanford, California: Center for the Study of Language and Information, ISBN 978-1-57586-585-0 (cloth), 978-1-57586-584-3 (paperback).
- [3] Knuth, Donald E. (2011) *The Art of Computer Programming Volume 4A: Combinatorial Algorithms, Part 1*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Addison-Wesley, ISBN 0-201-03804-8.



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