

July, 1997

Editor's View

Sharing Builds Community

The Fox community seems filled with "random acts of kindness"

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

A few years ago, someone gave my family a little book called "Random Acts of Kindness." It's filled with true stories of one person helping another just because. Generally the people in the stories are strangers to each other. The nature of the help ranges from simple acts like giving up a seat on the bus to things that truly make a difference in the recipient's life - finding a job, feeding a hungry child, and much more.

Looking at the book recently, I remembered how much it matches my philosophy of life and the way I was raised. I can't count the number of times my mother drove someone with no car home from the supermarket so he or she wouldn't have to carry the heavy groceries home. To this day, I look at people standing on bus stops to see if I can offer a ride to someone I know. (Sadly, I no longer feel safe offering a ride to most strangers.)

One of the things I tell my children over and over is "pass the kindness along." People often do nice things for me. While I can't always repay them directly, I can do something kind for the next person who comes along. If that person continues the chain, sooner or later, the one who helped me will receive a kindness.

It strikes me that the FoxPro community lives by this philosophy, too. On CompuServe, in the Microsoft newsgroups, on the Universal thread, at user groups, at conferences and elsewhere, we help each other, not for direct benefits, but because it's a nice thing to do. It's pretty common in the CompuServe forums for someone to get some help and then ask the helper "How can I repay you?" The answer is invariably "When you can, help someone else."

Those of us who speak at conferences do get some financial benefits (free admission to the conference and usually travel expenses covered), but the monetary value certainly doesn't pay for the time it takes to prepare our presentations. User group presentations are often given for free, but take a nearly equal amount of work. Similarly, the people who write for *FoxPro Advisor* and other publications get paid, but the payment rarely corresponds to the writer's usual rates for the amount of time it takes to prepare an article.

So why do we do it? It's another case of passing the kindness along. Most of the speakers and writers learned a lot from those who came before us. By taking our turn, we repay them. (Incidentally, writing this column has brought Tom Rettig to mind a lot. He was one of the strongest promoters of this kind of sharing in our community. He's been gone for over a year now and the hole left by his absence hasn't been filled, though the sharing he demonstrated still goes on.)

I think this attitude of sharing is one of the reasons we can refer to the "FoxPro community." Despite the fact that we're scattered all over the world and that we come in all colors, shapes and sizes, our willingness to help each other truly makes us a community.

I try to live the same way in the broader community, too. I hope you all do the same. The world can only be better for it.

What language *do* we speak?

My husband, the lawyer, picked up the May issue of FoxPro Advisor and started leafing through it the other night. (He often reads this column, but rarely tries to understand the rest of the magazine.)

He came across an article by Contributing Editor Ted Roche that referred to "variable naming conventions" and, in a moment of silliness, pointed out that the term seemed an oxymoron. How can a convention be variable? Shouldn't a convention be consistent? In the same frame of mind, he pointed out that, in fact, "variable names" must make programming pretty hard. How *do* we keep track of them, if they keep changing?

As he continued in this vein, I realized how specialized the language we use to talk about our work is. It may look like English to us, but it sure doesn't to others. Imagine someone overhearing us talking about "selecting a work area" or "replacing a field." Surely the listener would picture someone who works with his hands. And what about "client-server?" Isn't that what any professional is - someone who serves clients?

FoxPro has its own inherent silliness, too. What can you make of a language that includes WAIT WINDOW NOWAIT and MODIFY MEMO NOMODIFY?

There's a saying about Americans and the British being "two peoples divided by a common language." After looking at this stuff, I think maybe you could substitute "programmers" and "everyone else" for the Americans and British in the saying.

Thinking about this stuff never fails to bring a smile to my face. It's a good antidote for the days (or weeks) when life and work get too stressful and overwhelming.