

Narrator: David Vernier (DV)
 Interviewer: Melissa Swank (MS)
 Date: February 23, 2012
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 Transcribed by Melissa Swank, March 3–23, 2012

One audio file, 44 minutes, 48 seconds

Time Code	Transcription
	Audio File, 44 minutes, 48 seconds
0:00 – 5:37 Intro David Vernier	MS: This is Melissa Swank, graduate student at at Portland State University, today is Thursday, February 23, 2012, I'm interviewing David Vernier, co-founder of Vernier Technology and Software at his office in Beaverton, Oregon, do you give consent to have this interview recorded?
Vernier Software and Technology	DV: Yeah, the technical name is Vernier Software and Technology. Just you said "Vernier Technology and Software." No big deal. MS: Well now we have it on the record. So I want to start with your full name, date of birth, birth place, and kind of a little bit of family structure.
Birth Dayton, Ohio Christine Vernier	DV: David LloydVernier, born February 7, 1947, although I look a lot younger. I was from the Dayton, Ohio area. Went to school in Ohio. Went to Ohio State – went to community college, then went to Ohio State. And met my wife there and she still works here, and she's the co-founder and we still work together every day.
Ohio State University Studied Physics	MS: What did you study at Ohio State? DV: Physics.
	MS: What drew you to the science field? DV: Ah, I always was a science person. Erector sets and Chemistry kits and stuff

<p>Motivations</p>	<p>like that. And remember also, this was the time of the Sputnik thing, and we were trying to catch up with the Russians and I do think we had there a little bit of a burst in science education. Some extra resources were thrown to science teachers and they got some extra training. So there was a real push to get kids in science, and it worked for me. But I think, it didn't need to work for me, because I just liked science. Anyway –</p> <p>MS: Did you parents foster that? Or was there –</p>
<p>Relation-ship with parents</p>	<p>DV: No, my parents – although my parents, my dad only had about a fifth grade education, but he was a very well read person, he was certainly inquisitive and stuff, but um it wasn't like he was a scientist or anything – so.</p> <p>MS: Do you remember your first computer?</p>
<p>First computer</p>	<p>DV: Good Heavens! Unfortunately I do, because that was a big change in my life. Because what happened was, the whole company comes out out because of computers. First of all, I took a computer class in – one, only one – computer class in college. It was unfortunate. It was horrible, it was boring, we turned in punch cards and came back two days later to see if your program ran. And it was pretty brutally boring. But I did it for credit. And then, I went to Hillsboro High School to start teaching, that was after I had gotten a maters degree and started teaching.</p>
<p>Hillsboro High School</p>	<p>The business education teacher had terminals in her room, and they used them to teach typing really more than anything else. There were, I think, four tele-type terminals that kids could type on. Because it was a time-share thing. It was really run by the educational service district. And so during the day, she would have the kids come in here and type. And they'd submit reports and there was some interaction, but mostly it was about typing.</p> <p>MS: Mm-hmm.</p>

<p>Writing computer programs</p>	<p>DV: And so I knew her, and I worked out a deal so that after school I could go in there and use those terminals. So I did, and I used them all the time. I worked there three or four hours a day, every day, every evening and I would do things like write the programs that would do the grades for my kids. I just started doing physics programs, little simulations, and physics things. Remember, this is a teletype, this is all on paper. This was not very graphic, but you could do calculations. For example, I could do computer generated tests so that every kid had a different test. So that they couldn't copy answers and stuff. I started to see the ways that computers could be used for teaching. And then, not long after that –</p>
<p>Tektronix</p>	<p>Tektronix was a big player in this area in those days and they made graphic terminals. So you could think of it as a big calculator – the size of a large typewriter, or bigger than that even. A great big typewriter type thing. And then next there was a graphing terminal, sort of like a small TV screen which you could actually draw things on. So it was the first computer, that I ever saw, that you could really do graphics on. And I could make simulations of things. Like I could simulate satellite orbiting and how you get satellites to go out to the moon and back and stuff. And remember, we were sending people to the moon and back in those days so it was a big interest to teachers and to some kids. So I started doing simulation programs. And I learned programming on my own.</p>
<p>Apple II computer</p> <p>Sorcerer computer</p>	<p>And did the [inaudible] Tektronix calculator thing. And then, not long after that, you actually could start to buy computers. And so I bought – this was before Apple II – there were a few models you could get for a thousand dollars or so, extremely crude. I think the first one I bought for the school was a Sorcerer. And it was a simple, simple computer. But it would do graphics. The nice thing about that, was at least then I could bring that home to work at home. So my wife's not so furious that I'm working every night and staying at school. And then finally when Apple II came out, I bought one of those personally. And then started writing programs for Apple II. And so I certainly remember my first computers.</p>
<p>5:37 – 9:32 Moving to</p>	<p>MS: Mm-hmm. What drew you out to Oregon in the first place?</p>

Oregon Cleveland, Ohio	DV: Well you have to remember that – well first of all, I taught for four years in the ghettos of Cleveland, Ohio. And then I had been out west with my dad, who –
Oregon	we did the traditional east coast person driving across county in the summer time. with the kids. but my wife had never been west at all, and we were young we
Environ- mental issues	wanted to go somewhere exciting. Oregon had a great reputation in those days for being a leader in environmental things and that really impressed us. Things like
Oregon State University	The Beach Bill, The Bottle Bill, the urban growth boundaries, things like that. So we came out to Oregon as an adventure, but I went to Oregon State to get my
Work	masters degree, was the specific thing. And when I got my masters we loved Oregon and we looked for a job here.
	MS: So it was work that kept you here once you were here.
	DV: Well, I'd say it was more Oregon. In those days I could have gotten a job anywhere I think.
	MS: Did you search more around the Corvallis area, or did you –
	DV: I think the answer is we probably would have gone almost anywhere where that we could get a job. But I think we would have very quickly learned, that we're
	city people. We would have been bored out of our skulls in a small town. Corvallis was absolutely great. You can imagine coming from the ghettos of Cleveland to
	Corvallis, Oregon where nobody even locked their doors. We used to make jokes about it, it's like "Father Knows Best," or something like that. We were going from
	places where there were literally gunshots to a place where everybody knows everybody.
Children	MS: Did you and your wife have any children?
	DV: No kids.

	<p>MS: No kids.</p> <p>DV: No kids.</p> <p>MS: So it was just the two of you?</p> <p>DV: Yeah, we didn't ever want any kids and have no regrets about that decision.</p> <p>MS: Uh huh. But you had your kids in the classroom.</p> <p>DV: We sure did. We also have about one hundred employees here and sort of take care of them to some extent.</p> <p>MS: When you bring up your employees, um, some of the research described some of these tech companies as "family like."</p> <p>DV: Mm-hmm.</p> <p>MS: Would you say the same is true here?</p>
<p>Company culture</p>	<p>DV: I would, very much so. I think we – we've been on the "Best Places to Work in Oregon" list for thirteen straight years. And I think one of the reasons is that we do have sort of a family-feel here. We have a lot of parties and stuff. And today I'm passing out Timber's tickets.</p>
<p>"Best Places to Work in Oregon"</p> <p>Company activities and recreation</p>	<p>MS: Wow.</p> <p>DV: We've got four season tickets to Timbers and we're passing those out to people. Had a drawing to see who gets them. We have soccer games on Mondays and Wednesdays. Volley ball games on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Stretching kind of a class on Wednesday. On Friday we have both yoga and full court basketball.</p>

<p>MAX – trans- portation</p> <p>Employees</p>	<p>And we have a lot of events. Like, just last week we had movie day. We shut the office down–</p> <p>MS: Wow.</p> <p>DV: –and we all, we usually all get on the MAX and go downtown together to go to some movie. We pick them at a time when you can get maybe ten different movies that start roughly at the same time so people can pick which one they want to go see. And hopefully at least a discussion on the train on the way down there about which movie you're going to see and on the way back what'd you think. So we think it's a good socializing thing. And all those events are done with everybody in the company working. Yeah there is. We're very much promoting the idea that no one is better than anybody else. And we have everyone here from – we have four PhDs, scientists, and then we have people that fill boxes all day long. So, there's quite a mix of people.</p>
<p>9:32 – 13:18 Company social structure</p> <p>Product evolution</p> <p>Christine Vernier –</p>	<p>MS: Did you know when the company started – or when did you realize that you wanted that social interaction really to be a fundamental part of the company?</p> <p>DV: Well, you know, there never was a discussion because it's just the right think to do, you know. It's just the obvious thing. A slightly funny story related to that, was how we got our first office. We started the company almost by accident because I was doing these things for my class and we said, "Well, let's see if those could be useful to other teachers." I'll just spend the summer writing these programs then we'll try to sell them and worse case scenario I'll have better stuff for my kids, best case scenario maybe we sell them. And so that's how the company started. So, we puttered around like that for maybe a year or so. Finally we said, well if we're going to be serious about this, we better have someone here to answer the phone. Remember, there's no internet or anything. So schools would call and try to order and there was no one to answer the phone, that's kind of embarrassing. So my wife quit her job and she became the first employee and she</p>

first office

Nike

would stay home and work on all the business stuff. If the phone rang, take an order, and stuff like that. I would help her in the evening, and we'd ship the orders out, and stuff like that. And then gradually we decided that, well that was great, but we're not developing much new stuff because I'm teaching all the time. So I quit, I took a leave of absence, and she went back and worked at Nike actually to pay the bills. Then finally after another couple years, we both quit and there were two of us are home working. It did get busy enough that we said, "Well, yeah, we ought to have an employee to help." Because there was too much to do. So we hired this older woman, nice woman. And she would come to our house, we were still working in our house. We'd work away in the morning and then every day, about ten or eleven o'clock, Christine or I would say, or think to ourselves, "Oh my God, what are we going to have for lunch?" Because we come from the Midwest, and I think most people are this way, if someone is in your house, you offer them food. So we felt absolutely compelled to cook Pat's lunch every day. And that was a lot of work. If it was just the two of us, we could have left overs from the night before or peanut butter and jelly sandwich or something. But with her we felt, "Oh my God, we better plan our lunch." So it was almost more work than it was worth. So we saw that right behind us there was an office building, that had space available, so that really was what drove us to rent that office space. Because as soon as we got Pat into the office, when it moved over there. We no longer felt any compulsion to cook Pat's lunch. It was more like, "Well Pat, we're going to go to lunch now, we'll see you later." I think that's somewhat related to your question.

MS: So where was that first office located?

DV: Over in West Slope.

MS: West Slope.

DV: Mm-hmm.

<p>Canyon Road office</p>	<p>MS: And have there been any transitions from the time of that first office before you moved here?</p> <p>DV: Yeah, we were in West Slope for a long time, probably five different positions in that complex there by – well by the Dairy Queen there on Canyon Road. Well, it used to be a Dairy Queen, now it's something else.</p> <p>MS: Right.</p>
<p>Beaverton-Hillsdale office</p>	<p>DV: Anyway, then we moved over by Tillicum Tavern across the street from Jesuit High School.</p> <p>MS: Mm-hmm.</p>
<p>Millikan office</p>	<p>DV: And we added on to that building actually. In 2000, we moved here. This is an old Tektronix building. But Nike had gutted the inside of it. Nike rented it in 1995 and gutted the inside. So you're seeing a Nike remodel – it's like a Nike building inside of a Tektronix shell.</p>
<p>13:18 – 16:58 First projects</p> <p>Simulation programs – Apple II</p>	<p>MS: Which is a very interesting evolution of buildings there. Can you explain to me the first big project you worked on? Or what you would classify as your first big project?</p> <p>DV: Well, it's more like everything. All little things just kind of growing and growing and growing. I can't say that, it just was more like an evolution. We started with little, simple simulation programs on Apple II computers, were the first products. Then we probably, a revolutionary thing, and thank God we did this, we were selling these programs for eighteen dollars a piece. And that was a school site license. So all the school had to do was pay us eighteen dollars one time and they could make as many copies as they wanted and use them on as</p>

Experiment

many computers as they wanted. And obviously we wouldn't be around if that's all we did, because we couldn't possibly afford to run the business. I realized right away, that if you could use the computer to measure things – for example, in the olden days, if you were a science teacher and you were doing a demonstration with a thermometer say, showing kids something about how this reaction heats something up, or something like that. There was no way to do that experiment.

You would literally do stupid things like call Sally up to the front of the room and say, "Sally, would you read the thermometer and tell the kids what it says?" And she would read the thermometer and then you'd do the demonstration and say, "Johnny, come up. Tell the kids what the thermometer says. Isn't that exciting!" You know?

MS: I remember things like that. [Both talking at once.]

Temperature sensors

DV: About the most boring thing in the world. So it didn't take much computer technology to make a temperature sensor that we could plug in the computer and it would read a number on the screen or not much harder than that, a simple graph. So at least you could have a little more interesting display for the kids when you did your experiment and get them a little bit more involved. I was say that evolution into making hardware like that was a big deal. Not only was it something we could sell multiple copies of, right. Because best case scenario is the teacher buys one for demonstrations and then down the road they say, "Man, this is really cool! When I get some money I'm going to have one of those for each of my groups of students around my lab." So they might buy eight later and that's the kind of evolution that happened. And that's a pretty common thing now. A well-equipped school might have a set-up for data collection with not only temperature sensors, but other sensors, for each group of students.

MS: Mmm. So would you say that the students or the educators are your primary focus when designing these things?

<p>Students and teachers</p> <p>National Science Teachers Convention</p>	<p>DV: Well it's all about the students, but our customers, our teachers, I mean we've got to impress the teachers. We always, we talk to teachers all the time. They know best, I mean they know what they want to do. We do try to make a product that teachers would want to buy. and use with their class. Most of our interaction is with teachers. But remember, at least fifteen people here used to be teachers, so we also have our own basic background. But we always go to conferences. We're getting ready to go the the National Science Teachers Convention in late March and about twenty-five of us are going, so it's a huge deal. And we'll spend three days standing there talking to teachers.</p>
<p>16:58 – 21:15 Employees – former educators</p> <p>“Daily grind”</p> <p>Assisting teachers</p>	<p>MS: How do you find your employees that were once educators? Do they find you? Or do you find them?</p> <p>DV: In general, some of both, but when we go looking for a teacher it's not too hard because a lot of them know us. If we just put the word out that we're looking for somebody. [Side discussion about whether or not someone needed the conference room.] Anyway, it's been pretty easy to hire former teachers. It's a nice change of pace, you still feel like you're in education, and you are teaching, you're teaching other teachers. Yet, you don't have to grade papers, and you don't have that daily grind and it's a little different. So. You have a different daily grind I should say.</p> <p>MS: How would you describe your "daily grind"?</p> <p>DV: Well, for most of us, like me, it's a mix of answering teacher's questions, helping develop new products, writing books, testing software. For most of the former teacher-types, like me, they wouldn't complain about being bored, they might be complaining about being distracted in so many ways that they can't get any work done, drives them crazy. You know, they've got this project they want to get done but yet the phone rings. And they all know that teachers come first. If a teacher needs an answer to a question, stop your work and get that question</p>

Traveling

answered. So, I think that's probably the more frustrating thing. But on the other hand, they've got a pretty good lifestyle, I think. Most of them travel about once a month around the country to go to a show or something. The young ones choose to do that more. [MS laughs.] Honestly, there are some of them that are gone twice a month. They're flying to Orlando or New Orleans or somewhere, and they're working but they're also seeing the country and having some good times.

MS: Do you constantly have groups of people working on new things? Is that something that's –

Projects

DV: Yeah. Always new things. In fact, this is the twenty-third, on March first we announce probably the biggest new product in five years, so we're all scrambling to get that ready.

MS: Mm-hmm. That's exciting. So you mentioned a little bit about the social aspects of work here. What does the rest of your work week look like? I mean how do you balance out your work life and your personal life?

Social life

DV: Well, Christine and I, for a long time, didn't have much other than work. We worked all the time, we probably worked eighty hours a week for twenty-five years. But we didn't hate it. We liked what we were doing and we were working together and we were taking trips together. But, we worked an awful lot. We've lately gotten more and more into board service. We've been on multiple boards.

Board service

I'm on about three. She's on about three. So we're much more involved with board work now, but that just adds to the work load. But we are trying to take off earlier. And we're not working every weekend anymore, and we've definitely been traveling a lot. We've been traveling internationally a couple times a year. Working less, but way more than forty hours a week.

Marriage

MS: How do you feel like your relationship with your wife – do you feel like this company would be possible without her?

<p>Christine Vernier</p>	<p>DV: Well, I think if you interviewed people here and asked them who the most important person is here there would be no question. She would win. She's a great leader and very good at organizing things and getting things done. Keeping people happy and stuff like that. So. We have an amazing, lucky, combination. Most people are amazed that we can work together. It's thirty-one years of doing this. A lot of people are amazed, but I'm not really, we get along quite well. We go on vacation together by ourselves most times and choose not to be around other people because we like to be together.</p> <p>MS: Mm. That's really nice.</p>
<p>21:15 – 27:15 Challenges and successes</p> <p>Steady growth</p> <p>Regular employment</p> <p>Products and prices</p>	<p>MS: I want to ask you a series of questions on you challenges and successes here. What would you say has been the biggest success for the company?</p> <p>DV: Well, the greatest success, I think, has been amazing slow, steady growth. In thirty-one years, we've only had one year where our sales decreased. Which is quite remarkable. We've always been profitable. We're the opposite of a dot-com, with the huge upswings and the huge crashes. We've never laid a person off. And we hire temporary employees, because we know there is seasonal stuff, but we've never laid off a person that we've hires. And when we hire someone, our commitment is to keep them as long as they're doing a good job. I'm not saying we can always do that, we certainly can't guarantee that but we've made that effort. We certainly have provided a good work place for a lot of people. And we've provided good products, for affordable prices, for teachers. And we've listened well to teachers who tell us, kind of silly, that they're not good at technology and we've got to keep things simple. I think we're pretty good at listening to the teachers and providing a product that does what they need, and resisting the urge to create the world's greatest "something." We're not going to make the world's greatest "something." The world's greatest "something" is too expensive for a teacher to afford. We need to make a pretty good "something," that works well,</p>

and is easy to use but doesn't cost a fortune. And that's a driving theme and I think we do it pretty well.

MS: What about challenges?

Finances

DV: Well challenges, there's lots of them. Number one is schools don't have any money. I think about trying to sell something like a consumer product. Where you've got people that have, let's face it, people that love to spend money on things like iPhones and iPads and stuff like that. They have a lot more expendable money than schools do, so sometimes we think, "Wow, wouldn't that be great?" On the other hand, that's also a very up-and-down kind of business, ours is more steady. But the number one challenge is schools really are strapped for money and we have to work at keeping prices down. The number two challenge is that technology changes all the time. We're getting huge pressure right now to keep up with new devices that come along. And teachers call every day and say, "Hey, I just got some iPads for my class, what do you have for it?" Well, we don't have very much right now, we better get on it. So that's hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of development time to do that. So, we're doing that. But there's that pressure. But, you can always guess wrong. You might go down that route of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars and then that thing fizzles. So far we haven't done that too badly. But right now, here's a good question, should we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop android solutions with all the stuff we do? We couldn't – we could literally shut the company down except for making android applications and android versions of all our products for the next year.

iProducts

Apple
versus
Android

MS: Mm.

DV: That might either be a huge win, or it might be a huge disaster. Because who knows how it's going to go with iPhones versus androids, versus whatever else? So.

MS: Has that been a discussion?

DV: Sure. And I think that we will probably do a modest dabble in androids [inaudible] I wouldn't bet the farm on it, but it could go the other way. What if androids completely blow away iPads and people look back and say, "Why in the world did we waste our money on that iPad when this other one was so much cheaper?" I mean, it's possible. It could go that way, I don't think it will frankly.

MS: [Laughs and coughs.] Excuse me. What has your person, greatest challenge in this field been?

Personal
challenges

DV: Well, I think, I suppose, I haven't done a great job at the work-life balance thing, we've – well we're doing better now. We probably work too hard, for all those years. And when you die, it's unlikely that you're going to be sitting on that death bed and saying, "Gee, I wish I had worked a little bit more." But, I don't have any big regrets about that. So, personal challenges, I've enjoyed keeping up with the technology. I'm not great at some of the new stuff, but it keeps me busy, and it keeps me active. I think I've done an okay job at being a leader in the sense of team leader, not in the sense of being the world's greatest CEO. I don't know a damn thing about business stuff. I never took a business class in my life and I have great pride in that – for the record. I never will take a business class. I suppose I could have been a better leader in terms of being able to handle financial statements better and stuff like that. But it's not my cup of tea, I'd rather write a program.

CEO

MS: And what about your personal success? What would you say is defining of your level of success?

Teaching

DV: Well, I was a teacher for twelve years. And I was a darn good science teacher and I think I, I think I have helped a whole lot of science teachers become better

<p>Creating company</p>	<p>science teachers because we've provided good tools for them. I guess that's my greatest pride. The other would be creating this company, a pretty successful company, that a lot of different people like in a lot of ways. Both people who work here and a lot of our customers.</p>
<p>27:15 – 29:05 Place</p> <p>Washington County, Oregon</p> <p>Portland</p> <p>Hillsboro</p> <p>West Slope</p> <p>Northwest Portland</p> <p>City life</p> <p>Transportation</p> <p>Favorite places</p>	<p>MS: So, we'll move on to a place question.</p> <p>DV: Okay.</p> <p>MS: We'll move away from this. Why do you continue to live in Washington County? Or do you live in Washington County?</p> <p>DV: Actually, we live in downtown Portland pretty much, northwest Portland. Let's see, we've lived in – well gradually over our life, we've lived in Hillsboro, then we moved to West Slope, then we moved to Portland, but a little bit out of town just walking distance from downtown. But now we live [in] northwest. We just are city people. We like walking to restaurants and bars and grocery stores. If I can go the weekend without getting in a car I'm happy as a clam. We bought this building because it's on the MAX line. The MAX stops right there. We took the MAX to work today. We just think it's – Well, I just feel that walkability is a real key feature of choosing where you live. If you can walk to things it's a better place to live. That's my opinion. We– I just don't like this idea of [you] can't do anything without getting in a car.</p> <p>MS: What are some of your favorite places in downtown?</p> <p>DV: Well, we just went to South Park last night. We're at Mingo's right there on 21st by our house. Typhoon was until it closed. 23 Hoyt Place. Lots of restaurants, lots of bars. And the nice thing is there's grocery stores too. So we actually cook more, I think because we can walk home from the MAX, just walk by a grocery store and pick up some stuff, and cook and not have to go out. We're believers in the condo kind of lifestyle, but that's a personal thing, so.</p>

MS: But it's something that keeps you here too.

DV: Yep.

29:05 –
33:30

MS: And, well you mentioned that the company you chose on the MAX line.

DV: Mm-hmm.

“Silicon
Forest”

MS: So there's this idea of the "Silicon Forest" of Washington County. Do you remember the first time you heard, "Silicon Forest"?

1980s
economy

DV: I remember hearing that term. It's interesting. It had a little buzz there for a little while. It doesn't get used as much, it seems like, anymore. Maybe because the forest is not blooming as much, I don't know. Although that Intel thing they are building is pretty amazing. I thought it was an interesting twist. And it's great that there is this little bit of an electronics industry in Oregon. I just will tell one story. In 1981, the economy in this area was so bad that that's really what sort of led this company to start. Because my wife is working downtown, I'm teaching, summer comes and we don't have any kids. So we don't have a farm to take care of, or even land to take care of, or even a garden – small garden. So it's like, what am I going to do this summer? I'm not about to let her get up at five in the morning and go to work and me just lounge around in bed all day. So I had to get a job. It was so bad – I think it was worse than the last few years in terms of jobs, well you could look that up. But I think the economy was really worse. The fishing industry had gone "kapoo." Lumber was in a disaster. Um. [Intercom interruption, "Robin you have a call on your extension, Robin you have a call on your extension."]
Sorry. So I'm teaching and I said well when school gets out I'll go get a job doing somewhere, just make a little money during the summer. But it was so bad that the kids – I went after the kids got out. But we had a couple days of teacher grading and stuff. So I went literally to McDonald's, I couldn't get a job. The kids

got those jobs because they got out two days earlier. Right? I couldn't get a job as a bartender. I literally couldn't get a job for the summer. So I said, the hell with this, I'll spend the summer writing, improving these programs that I use with my kids and at the end of the summer we'll try to sell them. So that's how this company started. So it really did get sort of born out of recession. Had I got a job that summer who knows what would have happened. I probably would have kept puttsing around with the programs, but it might have been a thing where every summer I puttsed around with them and they got gradually better. But would it ever become a company? I don't know. Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans.

“Silicon Forest” versus “Silicon Valley”

MS: Yeah. It's really neat that it's something that's built out of that type of, you know, adversity. You can't really plan on things like that. When it comes to the "Silicon Forest" idea, do you see it similar or different from San Francisco's "Silicon Valley?"

Relationship to other technology companies

DV: Yeah, we're obviously very much a smaller – I've got to say that we have almost no connection with any of that. We're so isolated. I hardly ever talk to another business person, and I don't like to frankly. I'd rather talk to teachers. SO, the last thing in the world I like to do is get together with a bunch of businessmen and talk. I just don't have anything in common with them. I feel I belong to teachers and not to business people so I just can't say much about that. I just don't feel part of it.

MS: [Stumbles over questioning.] Was there at any point that you had any kind of connection—

DV: No, I was a teacher. We started making products for teachers. I just feel like I'm a teacher that kind of does some business stuff.

MS: So, very independent—

DV: Yeah, yeah.

MS: –from the rest of what you would say is going on.

DV: So we do hire lots of technology companies around here to build things for us, or to design things for us, or to provide products. You know. But I personally don't have too much connection with those guys. I guess we are involved, but I personally am not.

33:30 –
37:00

MS: I see. So can you tell me about the relationship between Texas Instruments and this company?

Texas
Instruments

DV: Well Texas Instruments makes us – first of all it's a multi-billion dollar company and the division we worked with, it seems strange, but I think it's a five billion dollar company, or something like that. But the division we work with is the calculator division. And that is amazingly ran almost by a company that's our size. In the good ol' days, starting in about 1994, we worked really, really, really close with them. And we got to know them and had them over to our house.

Calculator
division

Because it wasn't like it was a huge company, it was like this little division that was was not much bigger than us.

1994

MS: Mm-hmm.

DV: We worked together. And the idea then was, remember that computers were pretty darn expensive in those days. So it was pretty rare to have a school that had enough money to buy multiple computers for their science classroom. If you were a science teacher that wanted to do data collection, with each group having their own station to collect data, like temperature data. Very few schools could afford to do that with computers. But, many schools had the kids buying TI calculators. So, what if we could take those TI calculators and make something to plug into them

1990s

and then plug a temperature probe into that and then that can be the station that collects data. So that's what we developed. So we were working with TI and then that became a huge deal. In the late 90s, that was the hottest thing around. Our company probably doubled in size over that. It really was quite a revolutionary thing. Because it allowed teachers to do what they couldn't do before, which is have these multiple stations and kids actually doing science research in their own group. We had a great relationship. We loved working with those guys. We jointly designed some products, called LabPro and CBL2. That was in 1999. So the early 2000s we also were selling lots and lots of that stuff. We were very much involved with TI. Lately, unfortunately things happened. Not – It's just the kind of evolution of hardware. Such that we don't work together as closely as we did. And they might see us a little bit more as a competitor. But, we still work together. It's just not quite the same as it used to be.

2000s

Latest projects

MS: Mm-hmm. What are your latest projects that you're working on? Companies your working with?

DV: I can tell you but I'd have to kill you.

MS: Okay. [DV laughs.] Well, apart from the killing part.

Wi-Fi data streaming

DV: No we have this new thing that's going to be announced on March first, [2012] which is a new way to collect data. We're involved with using Wi-Fi getting data streaming to things like iPads. And stuff like that. It's quite a revolutionary thing. It's going to take some time to finish up and really perfect, but we're announcing it on March first. Not sooner.

MS: And this will not be released before that date.

DV: [Chuckling.] Okay.

37:00 –
44:48

Community
involvement

Awards

Christine
Vernier

Donations

MS: It's on the tape. Can you tell me about the ways that you see this company influencing the community around it? The ways that you give back?

DV: Well we, I think you will find many companies that have done more philanthropically. We just won the award from, well we've won the Outstanding Philanthropic Corporation Award several years ago. We've won the Nature Conservationist Business Partner Award. As I mentioned before, Christine and I are on lots of boards. They have those lists of philanthropic companies every year, we're on that list. I think, frankly, we're underrated because what happens is Christine and I personally donate a lot of money in the name of Vernier Software or in our own name. And if you lumped all of that together, we donate millions of dollars a year to the community for good causes. Including – I mean I can go on and on – OMSI, all the education foundations, Beaverton, Hillsboro, and Portland. Anything having to do with education. Robotics tournaments, Saturday Academy. Virtually anything having to do with education.

MS: Is that science exclusive? Or does it range?

Schools,
Universities
and
Institutes

DV: We tend to focus on the science stuff but not totally. I mean, Portland Schools Foundation, now called All Hands Raised, we donate money there and they use it for anything they want to use it for. A lot of the things, like First Robotics or Top Robotics Tournament, that's kind of science engineering oriented. So we tend to focus on those. OMSI we've donated a lot to. We've also donated a lot to Portland State [University], Oregon State [University], some to [University of] Oregon even. So I think we are – I don't think there's a better company on philanthropy in the state per person. I mean, some give more money, but not per person.

MS: So what causes you to stay in the area? Is it completely –

DV: Inertia.

MS: [Laughs.] Inertia.

Remaining
in Oregon:

Weather

DV: No, we love being here. It's a great place to live. The weathers not the greatest in the winter, but it's sure better than back East. Both in the winter and in summer. I mean, I do not understand why people live in the East. It's hot in the summer, it's cold in the winter. We have all the natural wonders, although Christine and I don't get out and see them as much as we should. But, it makes no sense to me why a person would live in the East is absolutely beyond me. The only thing I can think of good is a pan-flight to Europe in about four hours. That's good, for a vacation or something.

MS: Do you feel like the company would have developed differently if it had been in a different part of the world?

DV: You know, it's so hard to say because it kind of evolved. It's so different than saying, "We have this plan and for the first two years we'll do this, then we'll do this." There was nothing like that. It is accidental.

MS: Flexibility. You went with it.

Kansas
City

Con-
ventions

DV: The answer is, I can't imagine. It's just hard to know. But I guess it could have. And there would have been some advantages. I mean, frankly, Oregon's not the greatest place in terms of shipping stuff. If you wanted a place where you could develop products and then ship them off quickly it might be good to be in Kansas City. But I can't think of very many other reasons to be in Kansas City. You know, somewhere in the middle of the country. There was a time, this is I think interesting, there was a time when my wife and I were almost the only employees. There might have been two or threes others, but they were not career people, they were just helpers. And we would go around the country to physics teacher conventions and science teacher conventions, together. And go to fly to wherever it was. [We spent] a week in Kansas for a convention. And we would have dinner and do our work and then look around the town a little bit. We would

Ashland,
Oregon

Seattle,
Washington

Portland,
Oregon

always make the joke of if you want to move here, because we could have. There was a time when there was no strings attached. We could have moved just like that. And we did play that game a little. The only places we considered, we really liked Ashland. We went there for a conference. But we realized that was not a good place to fly out of because it's such a pain in the rear to fly to say New York from there. So that was rejected. And then we really liked Seattle because we like cities, but the traffic was so terrible. We said, "Aw, the hell with this. I'm not doing that." We liked Portland a lot. So no place percolated to the top and literally we went to a hundred cities around the country and we always played that game.

MS: Mm-hmm. You've brought up conferences several times or conventions that you and your employees go to. How do those things work? Do you all plan to go together?

National
Biology
Teachers
Conference

Workshops

DV: No. The most normal thing is a relatively small conference. Say the National Biology Teachers Conference. We might send three people. And we have a booth, maybe its a ten foot by twenty foot booth. We have a backdrop and all of our biology related products would be laid out. Those people would essentially stand there for three days as teachers walk by. And they would typically do workshops too. So maybe one of them stays in the booth and the other two go off for an hour and do a workshop where teachers can sign up, it's like a classroom. And they actually do labs and so the hope is that they would do those and say, "That was fun. If I ever get some money I'll buy that for my class." And we've been doing that for thirty years.

MS: Do you run some of the workshops yourself?

DV: Yeah. In fact I'm going to do some in late-March. But, mostly now it's other people.

MS: Mm-hmm. Do you feel like a mentor to your employees?

DV: A little bit. But I, excuse me. It's like, I don't think they need a tremendous amount of mentoring. Remember, most of them are former teachers and they feel great pride in their teaching ability. So, it's not like a make a real effort to be a mentor. Other than maybe as an example. Being nice to our customers and stuff like that.

MS: Well, here's the legacy question.

DV: Okay.

MS: How do you want to be remembered?

DV: Well. You know, we aren't having any kids and we're giving everything away. So, I'm sure there'll be – Fred Fields just recently died. There was a nice article. He did the same thing, he donated all of his money to various causes. Including OMSI and Portland Historical Society and Oregon Community Foundation. I think that'll probably happen. One or the other of us will die, and the other one will finally give all of that away. I think we'll be good philanthropists.

OMSI

Philan-
thropy

MS: Very involved in the community and that's a very large blessing and I'm sure that there are many people that are very thankful for what you do. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

DV: I think I've done most of the stories. Most of the war stories. Let's see. I think that pretty much covers it.

MS: That's great.

DV: I can give you a quick tour if you'd like.

MS: That would be great! Thank you very much.

DV: Okay, thanks.