

[Prepared for the *Brown Alumni Monthly*]

**Bob Wallace '71**

## **The Soul of the New Machine**

Bob Wallace entered Brown in 1967. A pioneer in personal computer software – employee #9 at Microsoft and subsequently the inventor of “shareware” with the program PC-Write that he created at his company Quicksoft – he died unexpectedly on September 20 in his home in San Rafael, California. He was 53.

“Gentleness” and “integrity” are adjectives that recur frequently in the many newspaper articles commenting on his passing. Said Paul Allen in the *New York Times*, “I remember Bob as a gentle soul who was soft-spoken, but creative, persistent, and meticulous in his programming and thinking.”

Bob decided at the age of 12 – in 1961 – that he would become a programmer. As a freshman at Brown he fell under the spell of Andy van Dam, who had joined the faculty two years before as an early practitioner of interactive computer graphics, with a particular focus on text processing and hypermedia systems. Bob was a key designer of Brown’s FRESS system, which provided what-you-see-is-what-you-get word processing with hypertext links – essentially, the editing and formatting capabilities of Microsoft Word combined with the hyperlink structure of the World Wide Web, but in the late 1960s, using a room-sized mainframe as a personal computer.

I was a year behind Bob at Brown. I too fell under Andy’s spell, and cut my teeth implementing some of the aspects of FRESS that Bob had designed. But I had actually known Bob as a teenager in Washington DC. Sadly for me, Bob left Brown at the end of my freshman year. I remember standing on the steps of the Watson Computing Center waving goodbye as he and his girlfriend headed west in a used bread truck, whitewashed to obscure the jolly balloons.

After Brown, Bob studied a year of theater arts at UC Santa Cruz, then a year of computer science. He made his way north to Seattle, completing his Bachelors in computer science at the University of Washington in 1974. I didn’t know any of this. But in 1977, fresh from graduate school, I arrived at the University of Washington as a faculty member and found Bob – now a UW computer science Masters student – sitting front-row-center in the first course I taught.

Bob joined Microsoft after completing his Masters degree – he’s in the middle of the top row in the famous “Albuquerque 11” photograph. Uncomfortable with various aspects of the industry he helped to create, Bob left Microsoft in 1983 to found Quicksoft, which marketed a text processing program of Bob’s design called PC-Write. PC-Write was the first “shareware” program – it was distributed for a nominal fee, but satisfied users were asked to pay an additional fee to register the program and receive documentation



Microsoft Albuquerque Group, December 7, 1978. Top row: Steve Wood, Bob Wallace, Jim Lane. Middle row: Bob O’Rear, Bob Greenberg, Marc McDonald, Gordon Letwin. Front row: Bill Gates, Andrea Lewis, Marla Wood, Paul Allen. Missing from photograph are Ric Weiland and Miriam Lubow. Photo courtesy Microsoft Archives.

and support. At its peak, in the late 1980s, Quicksoft had 32 employees and more than \$2 million in annual sales. Asked by *Seattle Times* columnist Paul Andrews why he continued to distribute PC-Write as shareware rather than selling it in the traditional way, Bob said “I’m out to make a living, not a killing.” Andy van Dam points out that in the 1960s, no one thought of software as a way to make money: “It was a way to bring the power of the hardware to the users, and it was a mind-expanding exercise for the programmer. Bob was a flower child in the nicest sense of the word.”

Bob had a long interest in psychedelic drugs. In 1991 he sold Quicksoft, and in 1993, “looking for other mind-expanding technologies,” he moved from Seattle to Northern California with his wife Megan Dana, eventually starting Mind Books and the Promind Foundation, both focused on psychedelics.

Columnist Paul Andrews, writing about Bob’s passing in the *Seattle Times* last month, said:

Truth ... integrity ... honesty. Not terms readily associated today with the software business – or the business landscape in general. With Wallace’s passing we are reminded that a person’s legacy ultimately rests more on principle and example than on how much money, fame or power he or she accumulated.”

Bob is the second early Brown computer science alumnus and van Dam disciple to die too young: John Gannon ’70 (M ’71), chair of the Department of Computer Science at the University of Maryland, passed away in June 1999.

**– Ed Lazowska ‘72**

*Ed Lazowska holds the Bill & Melinda Gates Chair in Computer Science at the University of Washington. Among many activities, he serves on the board of directors of the Washington Software Alliance, a software industry support organization that Bob Wallace founded in 1985.*