Diving In

Programmer Sue Manning is Volunteer of the Year

By Chip Dombrowski

Behind every great volunteer is another great volunteer.

Twice in the past four years, the Nadine Wood Volunteer of the Year award has gone to someone working on one of the technological advances that have changed the landscape of online bridge. Four years ago, it was Jay Whipple, for creating the virtual clubs, among other things. Two years ago, it was Brian Platnick and Franco Baseggio, for EDGAR, the computer-based cheating-detection program. Not to take anything away from these recipients, Sue Manning of Ithaca NY played a small role in both of these developments, serving as the meetings secretary and webmaster for the virtual club project and writing some code for EDGAR.

Meanwhile, she also had her hand in just about every other bridge technology of the past five years, from the Shark Bridge teaching console to Swan Games to numerous projects with Whipple and the ACBL information technology department. Taken together, Manning's contributions are not small. She is the 2024 Volunteer of the Year.

"She is a relentless volunteer," said Whipple, who has seen much of Manning's work up close. "She finds these projects that are going on and volunteers to help. She does whatever they need. People quickly realize how capable, trustworthy and helpful she is. She's extremely talented. I love working with her."

Looking at the list of Manning's contributions and seeing how many of them involve Whipple – who in 2023 was inducted into the Hall of Fame for his service to the bridge community – you might think they'd known each other for decades from their professional careers in technology. But it turns out they met in March 2020, when Whipple and former Bridge Base Online CEO Uday Ivatury were beginning their work on the virtual club platform.

Manning was a volunteer at the Bridge Club of Ithaca, and she had the same idea: She was looking for a way to hold her club games online. She kept pestering people at BBO and the ACBL until someone, she doesn't remember who, told her she needed to talk to Whipple.

She came to the meetings of those working on the project and, while Zoom was still new to all of them, took responsibility for recording the meetings and storing them on a website along with other documents related to the project.

"[Whipple] had this document he would update every week," Manning explained. "He gave me access to it. I kept sending him corrections and corrections and corrections, because he's a terrible writer. So he put me in charge of it."

That was just the beginning.

"She kept saying, 'Is there anything else I can help with?'" Whipple said. "I'd say, 'Want to try this?' and she just took it and ran with it. Her work is really high quality."

Manning's bridge journey began when she was working at Xerox between 1985 and 1987. Occasionally co-workers needed her to sit in as a fourth. It didn't happen very often, and she didn't give the game another thought for more than 20 years.

Manning started working for Apple as a systems programmer in 1987. Her husband, Alan Demers, had been a computer science professor at Cornell – where Manning got her master's degree – who also went to work for Apple. In 2000, they went back to Ithaca so Demers could return to Cornell and Manning could be closer to her mother. She continued working for Apple remotely for a few years, retiring early in 2002. She battled cancer and recovered, and by 2010, was looking for a new challenge. A friend wanted to take bridge lessons at Cornell's campus club, and she agreed to go along.

After a few years, she was ready to take the next step, going to a teaching session at the Bridge Club of Ithaca, and she joined the ACBL in 2014. She's about 65 points – including 20 silver – away from making Life Master, but isn't particularly trying to get there.

"It's really hard on your ego," she said of bridge. "I love that I'll never get good at it."

As she got involved in bridge, Manning saw how much everything in bridge depended on volunteers. "If you don't volunteer, who's going to do it?" she said. "I do my best to use my talents to help them."

Manning directs her club's one online game per week and makes all the boards for the in-person games. She keeps the club's dealing machine at home to keep it safe from untrained hands.

The pandemic opened a lot of volunteer opportunities for her. "I talked to more people in the pandemic than I ever did before that," she said.

Manning is an avid consumer of bridge educational materials and has assisted a number of teachers and developers with teaching technologies. She got to know Milen Milkovski, the developer of Shark Bridge, through one of his other projects, the Audrey Grant Better Bridge app. She

would find mistakes while doing the challenges and wanted to send in corrections, so she tracked him down. As with Whipple, she asked to help and ended up writing a module on movements and scoring for Shark.

Manning takes lessons via Shark from Adam Parrish, and volunteered to help him with the relaunch of Swan Games.

"She's fantastic," Parrish said. "She came to all of our meetings and took on various projects that no one else wanted to do. I'm so grateful for her help and support."

Manning encountered teacher Howard Schutzman in BBO's beginner intermediate lounge. She started sending him questions and eventually became the proofer for his weekly lesson on his website *hondobridge.com*.

On Saturdays, Manning assists Houston online teacher Sam Khayatt, whom she met in the virtual club meetings, with the Zoom portion of her lessons.

When she heard about EDGAR, she reached out to Baseggio and asked if he needed any programming help.

"I guess I'm a pushy person," Manning said.

Twenty years after leaving Apple, Manning was just really bored and constantly looking for more work to do. It's a wonder she had time for all these other projects for as busy as Whipple kept her. Whipple is famous for his all-hours schedule; Manning puts a higher priority on sleep but gets caught up in her work enough to go on all-night programming benders from time to time.

Manning was particularly useful to Whipple because she knew – sort of – the obscure programming language he liked to work in. After launching the virtual clubs, they began to do a lot of co-programming together.

"It's extremely helpful," Whipple said. "It keeps you motivated. You're forced to articulate what you're doing, which helps clarify your thinking. She sees typos. It saves an enormous amount of time figuring out what went wrong. She's already caught it.

"If I didn't have her motivating me, there will be times where I try to take a shortcut. She would say, 'No, we need to solve that.' She's my conscience in the development process."

Projects that Manning has worked on with Whipple include:

- an overhaul of the STaC process that removed the incredibly complex work done by DICs of STaCs and replaced it with a computer program, aggregating the games of all the participating clubs and grouping them appropriately to determine overall awards
- an interface for club directors uploading games to Live for Clubs that lets them know what options are available for special games, which both encourages directors to take advantage of the offerings and also prevents abuse by flagging any ineligible special game submissions.
- a tool behind the 5–5–5 program used by units to help retain members
- the Big Teams platform used to run team games online, such as GNT trials.

Additionally, when Whipple was asked by then-president Joann Glasson to review the ACBL IT department in 2022, Manning participated in all of the meetings with Whipple and employees.

As much as Manning gives to the bridge world, that isn't the extent of her volunteer work. She does proofreading for one of her favorite science fiction authors. A scuba diver, once a year she spends nearly two months in Indonesia volunteering for the Reef Environmental Education Foundation, an organization that keeps a public database on undersea creatures. It's sort of like a fish census. She marks down the different species of fish she encounters on her dives and uploads her findings at *reef.org*.

Whipple describes Manning's recent trip to Indonesia as the longest they'd gone without talking since they started working together.

Giving of her time seems to come so naturally to Manning that she rarely stops to articulate why she does it. While her need to keep busy is the main reason, there are a few more.

"I think maybe I'll set a good example," she said. "There's so many things that need to be done. If you don't volunteer for the things you don't mind, you might get stuck doing something worse." ■

