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Oh, what tangled Webs we weave

SJSU now connected to 21st century technology

*By Mary Beth Hislop
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With the presence of mega computer-software company Adobe housed at its heart, the city of San Jose can defiantly boast that it is the capital of Silicon Valley. But in 2002, San Jose State University did not even have an updated Website in place designed to demonstrate the brains of that technology or promote itself in the field of higher education. Enter Paul Nozicka.

Nozicka was hired by the university in November 2002 as the university's Webmaster to alleviate that embarrassing problem.

"There was a definite societal expectation that the university use technology to a certain degree simply based on our location in Silicon Valley. In terms of Web technologies, this was far from being met," Nozicka said.

Although his formal academic background is in biology and physical therapy, Nozicka said computers and graphics have always been personal hobbies.

"In 1995, when the Web became graphic-based, I was naturally drawn to it as it married two of my interests," he said.

While searching for a graduate program in physical therapy in 1999, California State University, Sacramento offered Nozicka a job as its Webmaster.

"I was known on campus for having designed and developed many department, program and student organization sites," Nozicka said. "I have been designing for the Web since there was a visual Web to design for. My first page/site was designed in 1994/95 when Mosaic first came out."

Nozicka said his first task as SJSU's Webmaster was to manage and oversee the Web redesign project. www.sjsu.edu/redesign The university contracted the services of Web design company Razorfish. Work on the Website began in January 2003 and was completed in April.

"Between April and August 2003, the work done by Razorfish was completely recoded to ensure Web standards compliancy and cleaner coding practices," he said. The university launched the Website in Fall 2003. www.sjsu.edu

The work will never be finished.

With over 100,000 pages on its domain, the pages must be continually updated for currency and relevancy. While public affairs updates news and events at the site, Nozicka said it is his responsibility to maintain the top-level university pages. Individual site owners maintain their own Websites.

“Sites using the sjsu.edu template benefit from a content management system which simplifies the maintenance process,” he said. Nozicka said he and his staff cannot keep up with the requests for help from individual site owners.

“Our job is to develop solutions that allow the campus to build and maintain their Web sites and use other Web technologies with little required technical knowledge or aptitude,” Nozicka said.

Nozicka also faces the challenge of keeping up with ever-changing technology.

“The speed at which technology evolves — overnight something can go from being an emerging technology to being the next thing that people are knocking down your door demanding,” he said. “This is a given.”

According to Nozicka, the money allocated by the university to maintain the Website goes towards staff and hardware, when needed.

“By establishing a robust and scalable technical infrastructure and hiring staff with exceptional skills, we can continue to identify and roll out Web services powered by open-source solutions practically for free,” Nozicka said. The university is looking into blogs, wikis, e-portfolios, portals and learning management systems to incorporate into the site.

Nozicka acknowledges that many of the Websites he designed in the past for assembly members, senate candidates, organizations and universities are now offline. Though he actually designed SJSU’s virtual tour site, www.sjsu.edu/vtour, Nozicka said that designing a Website isn’t all about visuals.

“If you compare building a Website to the building of a house, then I am now more of the architect and contractor rather than the painter,” he said. Nozicka said there are many sites that offer an incredible visual journey, but are difficult to use.

“Any good artist can design a decent site, but it takes much more to develop an excellent site that is not only engaging, but it also has a logical content structure and navigation system while maintaining a strong, visual hierarchy,” Nozicka said.

Nozicka maintains his own blog, <http://nozicka.net/>, which offers advice and insight into his passion for Website usability, visual display of quantitative information, metrics, semantics, color theory, as well as global branding and marketing.

“I focus on user-centered, standards-compliant, accessible design and believe that a Webmaster needs to have an amalgamation of knowledge to be successful at (his) job. It is not enough to be a designer or developer without knowing what is needed to truly make a Website successful,” he said.

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