

this month

In FreeBSD

BY DRU LAVIGNE

many in the FreeBSD (and other BSD) communities mark the month of May on their calendars as the time to embark on the annual migration to Ottawa, Canada, for BSDCan. This conference, now in its 11th year, has grown over the years to include two days of tutorials, two days of three presentation tracks, Developer Summits, a Vendor Summit, Doc Sprints, Foundation meetings, and an opportunity to become BSD certified.

I recently asked Dan Langille, the organizer of BSDCan, for his thoughts on why and how BSDCan came to be and what he has learned about the BSD community along the way.

Dan writes:

“ My first introduction to BSD conferences was FreeBSDCon at Berkeley in Oct 1999. I had been using FreeBSD for nearly 18 months by that time. Reading back on my notes (<http://www.freebsdjournal.org/freebsdcon99.php>), I see I was impressed by the social nature of that conference and how it contrasted with others. The next year, I attended the same conference, but now known as BSDCon, at Monterey in 2000. I had another great time, lots of fun, and learning new stuff.

At the time, I was living in Ottawa and active with OCLUG, the local Linux group. I had helped them organize OSW (Open Source Weekend) which went rather well. If I recall correctly, BSDCon stopped running and nothing filled the void. I knew of Ottawa Linux Symposium, run by Andrew Hutton. I had lunch with Andrew a few times and we talked about running conferences. His conference was vastly different to BSDCan (e.g. the budgets were astounding). For comparison, one of the parties held back then cost more than entire budget of BSDCan 2014. It was this that gave me the confidence to talk to University of Ottawa about hosting a conference. I calculated that should the worst happen and nobody turned up, I'd be about \$2,000 down. I registered bsdcan.org in August 2003 and everything went from there.

The announcement went out in Jan 2004 (<http://lists.freebsd.org/pipermail/freebsd-announce/2004-January/000934.html>) and a few months later, the BSDCan tradition started.

The most surprising thing was how well received the conference was and how relieved I felt once the conference was over. The applause at the start of the closing session was overwhelming and brought tears to my eyes. People said the conference went very well and they commented on how relaxed I was during the conference. They asked me what my secret was. I didn't have one. I just organized the conference to provide the type of

experience I would want.

Things changed over the years. In the beginning, we went to the local pubs for lunch, but we soon outgrew what they could provide. Now lunch is included and people stay at the venue. That gives yet more face-time, and it's the social interaction that I saw at FreeBSDCon which lives on at BSDCan.

For the first conference, I wrote a registration package and a rough scheduling system. The registration software is still in use, but in 2007, we moved to Pentabarf for processing talk proposals and for generating the schedule. That was the same year I started running PGCon, which occurs the week after BSDCan.

In 2006, the FreeBSD project held a Developer Summit at BSDCan, and they have continued this each year since. It has grown to over 120 attendees and their participation has helped grow BSDCan.

Some comparisons between BSDCan and PGCon: although the two conferences are roughly the same size, PGCon receives roughly three times the submissions for talk proposals.

This year, I received a great deal of help from Jennifer Russell. She has been the main person collecting and arranging travel. It's been so successful that I want to continue involving more people in BSDCan organization, primarily for two reasons:

- 1- to reduce my work load
- 2- ensure continuity of BSDCan (I won't be doing this forever)

The main thing I always kept in mind when organizing a conference: stay core. Don't get involved in anything which is not a core conference activity. Stay focused. For example, if someone wants video, let them do it. Don't get involved.

The most surprising aspect of conference organization is the necessity of an optimistic attitude.

Treat your sponsors well. They are the life blood of the conference. Without their contributions,

BSDCan would not be as successful as it has been.

If you have never been to a BSD conference, pick one, and go. You are passionate about the tools you have chosen. Go to a conference and meet others with similar passion. The relationships you form will be extremely beneficial to both you and the projects you have chosen. There is no substitute for face to face meetings.”

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On Dan's last point, I couldn't agree more. The relationships you form when attending a conference like BSDCan are a benefit that is hard to fully comprehend until you experience it. Many users are hesitant to attend a conference: sometimes they think the content will be over their heads, or that developers will look down on them for being just a user or that they won't know what to say if they run into someone famous in the community. But do you know what new attendees quickly discover? That it is really cool to put faces to people that until now you have only dealt with as an IRC handle or an email address, and that the personality you may have envisioned is very different once you get to share a meal or chat face-to-face. And you learn that so-called famous people are really pretty laid-back and just another friendly someone you can chat with. That it is really cool to mention off-hand a problem that you have encountered only to find that the fix to that problem was committed by another attendee a few hours later. That it is amazingly refreshing to spend a few days with a whole bunch of people to whom you don't have to explain what FreeBSD is and to realize that, while you may be the only FreeBSD person you know back home (not counting the ones to whom you have explained FreeBSD), you're not the only FreeBSD person out there. And, possibly most surprisingly, comes the realization that while you may feel that your use of and contribution to FreeBSD is minimal, you really are a part of a larger community and that others are genuinely interested in how and why you are using FreeBSD. These are the reasons most attendees look forward to attending year after year.

MORE ON EASTER EGGS

- Dru Lavigne's March/April column mentions Easter Eggs. It contains the comment "more is less than less and less is more than more." Whilst I agree with the latter, more(1) predates less(1) by at least 4 years.
- Rummaging around, I note the earliest Unix more(1) I have is from 3BSD and dated November 1979. The earliest less(1) I have was posted in mod.sources (comp.sources.unix) volume3, and the earliest entry in its changelog is January 1984.
- I initially thought more(1) was a pun on the AT&T pg(1) utility, but the 3BSD man page includes a reference to "the 'more' feature of the ITS systems at MIT," so the name may be related to the latter.

—Peter Jeremy, A FreeBSD Committer
(peter@rulingia.com)

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