COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS: BEYOND THE TECHNOLOGY

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O'Reilly Open Source Award recipient Elizabeth "pleia2" Krumbach shares how she got her start in open source. **BY AMBER GRANER**

Q Congratulations on winning an O'Reilly Open Source Award [1]. For readers who haven't heard about that award: What is it? What did winning this award mean to you personally?

A O'Reilly gives five Open Source Awards [2] per year at OSCON [3], and this award is given to people who have "demonstrated exceptional leadership, creativity, and collaboration in the development of Open Source Software."

Although I do a lot of work in open source, I have to admit to being surprised by winning. I've never made an effort to be a particularly public figure in the open source world, and my work has been driven by interest and digging into projects where I saw things needed to be done. It was quite an honor to be recognized.

Q If you could give one of these awards to an unsung hero in the community who would it be? Why?

A Many people I've worked with over the years are exceptional. I've always been impressed by the work and long-term commitment of Daniel Holbach [4] in the Ubuntu community [5]. Not only does he have the skills as a true leader within the community and is someone I always know I can talk to, he's also a talented developer.

Q What advice would you give anyone wanting to get started either using an open source application or distribution?

A The first advice I'd give is to not expect it to be a free clone of other software you're familiar with. Particularly when you're learning to use something like the Unity desktop [6] environment in Ubuntu, when you truly approach it as something new, you'll find yourself learning new shortcuts and all kinds of better ways to do things.

I'd also say don't be afraid to try new things or break things. You'll be in the process of learning and you never learn so much as when you're breaking things!

Q What makes getting involved in Open Source projects and communities so important? Do you have suggestions for readers who want to transition from user to contributor?

A The benefits of getting involved with open source are pretty obvious from the perspective of the project – they get your expertise. There are also a lot of benefits for you, including getting to work in an interesting community with a variety of people, real experience with whatever facet of open source work you're contributing to, and it's common for people to get career boosts from contributing. From my work in the open source world, I now have friends all over the world – and often visit when I'm in town – and my career has certainly benefitted.

When you start out, I'd suggest finding a project you're interested in and visiting the project website to see if they have any kind of "get involved" link that may have lists of things you can work on to help. If not, I'd say join their mailing list or chat channel to get a feel for the community. Tasks will often surface – my first contribution to open source was writing docs [documentation] for a project after the lead developer mentioned in chat that they really needed to be rewritten. It also

allows you to determine whether the environment is one you're comfortable with, some are more friendly than others.

Q You are active in many open source projects. Can you tell readers a little about those projects and how they can contribute?

A The big projects I'm involved in on the Ubuntu side are probably Ubuntu Classroom [7], News [8], and Women [9]. For all these projects, we have chat channels and mailing lists where you can learn what we do, and new contributors are welcome.

In Xubuntu [10], I am the website and marketing lead, but we're a small team, so I pitch in with testing, documentation, and whatever else comes along. There are tasks that often come up during team meetings, which everyone is welcome to attend, and on the development mailing list. We talk about docs and art and everything that goes into making Xubuntu here, too, not just highly technical things. I really love local community (LoCo) [11] Ubuntu teams, so I do a lot of work with Ubuntu California [12] these days and run the server that hosts the US [13] and Pennsylvania [14] websites.

Finally, I would caution against joining a project and simply saying, "Hi, how can I help?," because most projects aren't really equipped to answer that question when they know nothing about you. You really want to find an area that interests you and ask specifically if there is something you can do, or better yet, find a task yourself and approach them about it. My serious involvement with Xubuntu began because I noticed the website wasn't updated much and I offered to help maintain it.

Q Looking back over your time in open source, do you have any idea how

many volunteer hours you've invested in these projects? What drives you to keep doing it?

A I'm almost afraid to guess. For the first several years I was working with open source it wasn't a lot – maybe a few hours a month. For the past four years or so, it's been like a second job. I put in at least 10 hours a week, sometimes upwards of 20.

The more you get involved, the more you'll see places where you can help, so it's easy to become more involved. After a while, it's saying *no* to new opportunities that becomes hard. I think what keeps me going is that I honestly care about the success of the projects I work on, so I do whatever I can to make sure they are sustained. I'm also fortunate to be at a point in my life where I have the resources and means to spend so much time working on things I'm passionate about.

Q You are a member of Ubuntu Community Council. Can you tell readers what that council is, how you get to be part of it, and what the council does?

A The Community Council (CC) [15] is one of the two governing bodies of the Ubuntu community, the other being the Tech Board [16]. The CC pretty much handles non-technical decisions and disputes within the project, including changes to the Code of Conduct, helping other projects, and staffing smaller boards and councils. We're also available to talk to when people need advice about the direction of a project or are having problems in their community or finding blockers that they need help getting through. At our meetings every other week, we invite feedback about the state of the Ubuntu project from anyone in the community.

The Community Council is, with the exception of Mark Shuttleworth who is a permanent member, elected by Ubuntu Members [17] every 2 years. Any Ubuntu Member can be nominated for a role on the CC, but those who are elected tend to be those who have a history of being well-respected for their fairness and dedication to the project.

Q What is your current distribution of choice? What operating system did you start with?

A I'm currently using Xubuntu on most of my systems at home, and Debian [18] on most of my servers. My first Linux distribution was Red Hat 7.2 [19], and 10 years ago I started using Debian. When I discovered Ubuntu in 2005, I put it on a laptop and WiFi worked out of the box, so I kept with it, installing the Xfce desktop [20] because it was an older system. My day job is as a systems administrator, and we use a deb-based distribution, so it was easy for me to stick with the same at home.

Q What have been some of the most exciting and rewarding moments for you as part of the Ubuntu Community? Also, what are some challenges you've had to overcome? What did you learn about yourself and about being a better leader because of those experiences?

A The local community (LoCo) teams are where I really have found the most exciting and rewarding moments. From meeting people from other LoCos when I'm traveling to attending events put on by the local team during the Ubuntu Developer Summit (UDS) [21], it never stops being an inspiring source of involvement.

The biggest challenge I've faced is dealing with conflict when I'm personally friendly with people on both sides of the conflict. As a leader, I've had to make and stand by some personally painful decisions that have impacted people I care about. Similarly, I struggle with the balance between giving people chances to improve their behavior and the harm it's inflicting upon the community. Fortunately, I work with a lot of other great leaders, and my tendency toward personal forgiveness is tempered by their passion for making sure the broader environment is a healthy place to work.

Q Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you would like to discuss?

A I didn't talk much about Ubuntu Women, but the goal of getting more women using and involved with open source has been a passion of mine for many years. At first it was driven by selfishness – I didn't want to be the only woman in the room – but I've since learned from studies about diversity that projects and teams simply work better and are more successful when they are

diverse. Because I want open source to be as great and successful as possible, I think increasing diversity is a healthy way to get there, and the struggles many women face in open source is one I'm personally familiar with. We never have enough contributors, and ignoring half the population because they didn't have the same opportunities or encouragement to get involved with open source isn't a great way to fix this problem. I'm quite proud of the work Ubuntu Women has been doing to promote female role models and mentors throughout our community and to offer a space where women can meet and collaborate.

Q Thank you, Elizabeth, for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to us about Ubuntu and its community. ■

INFO

[1] OSCON 2012 – O'Reilly Open Source Awards video: *http://youtu.be/szl-_D_HLTs*

[2] O'Reilly Open Source Awards: *http://tinyurl.com/cz2qoey*

[3] OSCON 2012: *http://www.oscon.com/oscon2012*

[4] Daniel Holbach: *http://daniel.holba.ch/blog/*

[5] Ubuntu Community: *http://www.ubuntu.com/community*

[6] Unity: *http://unity.ubuntu.com/*

[7] Ubuntu Classroom Blog: *http://ubuntuclassroom.wordpress.com/*

[8] Ubuntu News Team Wiki: *https://wiki.ubuntu.com/NewsTeam*

[9] Ubuntu Women: *http://wiki.ubuntu-women.org/*

[10] Xubuntu: *http://xubuntu.org/*

[11] LoCo Teams: *http://loco.ubuntu.com/*

[12] Ubuntu California Loco Team: *http://loco.ubuntu.com/teams/ubuntu-california*

[13] Ubuntu US: *http://ubuntu-us.org/*

[14] Pennsylvania Loco Team: *http://loco.ubuntu.com/teams/pennsylvania*

[15] Ubuntu Community Council: *https://launchpad.net/~communitycouncil*

[16] Ubuntu Technical Board: *https://launchpad.net/~techboard*

[17] Ubuntu Membership Wiki: *https://wiki.ubuntu.com/Membership/*

[18] Debian: *http://www.debian.org/*

[19] Red Hat 7.2: *http://tinyurl.com/d86ymbc*

[20] Xfce: *http://www.xfce.org/*

[21] Ubuntu Developer Summit: *http://uds.ubuntu.com/*