

Large installations, huge opportunities

ADMIN ADEPTS

System administrators from around the world meet to learn, share experiences, and have a good time. **BY MATT SIMMONS**

When you first see him, you'd never suspect that Adam Moskowitz organized the largest gathering of system administrators in the world. He's tall, sports a long ponytail, and has a seemingly endless supply of Hawai'ian-style shirts (handmade for him by his wife). He was wearing one of them as he opened the proceedings for the 2009 LISA conference.

Held in the beautiful Marriott Waterfront on the inner harbor of Baltimore, Maryland, this year's Large Installation System Administration conference was an astounding success. Even in a flagging economy, more than 800 administrators showed up from around the world to listen, talk, network, and learn from industry and thought leaders.

This annual event is produced by USENIX and SAGE, in cooperation with the League of Professional System Administrators (LOPSA) and the Storage and Networking Industry Association (SNIA). Although the official conference proceedings started on Wednesday, festivities really began the Saturday before with a mixer to introduce attendees, followed by days full of training leading up to the opening session.

On early Wednesday morning, Moskowitz stood in front of the assembled crowd to let them know that they'd been hoodwinked: "So, I'd asked all of the past LISA chairs to please show up right at 8:45 for something here. It was a lie." Apologetically, he added, "I'm sorry."

As it turns out, one of the past LISA chairs had won the 2009 SAGE Outstanding Achievement Award. Founded in 1993, the award goes to someone whose professional contributions to the system administration community over a number of years merits special recognition. This year's award went to David Blank-Edelman. After some convincing, David went up to the podium, thanked Adam

and the assembled crowd, then hurried out of the room. The reason for the subterfuge, and his rush, was that he was characteristically helping to educate others by teaching an early morning class called "Over the Edge System Administration."

"Over the edge" is a phrase could go a long way to explain LISA in general. A lot of work is needed to run a conference that draws 800+ system administrators. "It takes close to a hundred people to produce this conference," Adam says; "it's closer to 300 by the time you count all the authors and speakers. I couldn't have asked for a better team to work with." In addition to the attendees and many dedicated workers, dozens of vendors crowded into a hall on the second floor to show their wares and give away bags full of merchandise of all kinds.

BigFix Inc., one of the conference sponsors, held a "Sysadmin of the Year" contest and awarded the grand prize at LISA. For months prior, they had solicited applications from sys admins and their users. An internal panel judged each entry and passed a set of finalists to

an all-star panel of judges consisting of Aileen Frisch, Tom Limoncelli, Robert Scoble, and more. The theme of the Sysadmin of the Year contest was "Sysadmin Rockstars," so nothing would do but to present the award at a rockstar-style bash, complete with concert by Baltimore native Duff Goldman, star of Food Network's *Ace of Cakes*. Duff not only brought his band "...soihadto..." he baked a rockstar-themed cake, which was shared by the winners and attendees at the party. The progressive jackpot of \$4,400 was won by Nick Weber. To conform with his company's policies, Nick elected to donate the prize to the charity "Hackers for Charity," an organization dedicated to technology transfer, education, and nutrition programs in sub-Saharan Africa.

As numerous as the events were, if you are a system administrator, there are many reasons why you would want to go to LISA. The most obvious is the training, which was amazing, and the people teaching were top notch. Theodore Ts'o, lead developer of the ext4 file system, taught "Linux Performance Tuning." Aileen Frisch, author of *Essential Systems Administration* taught "Administering Linux in Production Environments." People like this have not only been in the field, in some cases, they've invented it.

Of all the reasons to go, though, the "hallway track" is the most compelling. Interacting with the 800+ other administrators there was absolutely worth the entire trip. Meeting other administrators, seeing how they approach problems and get past them, and sharing experiences was an unbelievably rewarding experience. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Leaving on Friday was bittersweet, but I felt that I'd made many lasting friends. Adam closed the conference with the announcement that LISA 2010 would be held in San Jose, California from November 7 to 12 and would be chaired by Rudi van Drunen. Put it on your calendar now, because LISA is an invaluable resource for sys admins, and if you haven't been there, you need to come. I'll see you in San Jose! ■



Figure 1: Attendees and vendors mingle to talk shop and witness the state of the art in Baltimore.