

Computer-guru Wozniak shares his story in Tahoe

By Linda Fine Conaboy

INCLINE VILLAGE – At least a thousand people sat shivering inside a huge tent under a brilliant icy blue Lake Tahoe sky, all captivated by Steve Wozniak as he talked about the beginnings of his company Apple Computer, Steve Jobs, his life as a teen in Silicon Valley, life at Hewlett-Packard, where he worked as an engineer although he had no college degree, and an assortment of topics in between.

A natural entertainer, The Woz, as many know him, never lacked for words during the interview-style discussion last week at Sierra Nevada College, where he headlined the Siebens-Binz SNC Tahoe Forum and was introduced by Nancy Siebens-Binz, a long-time benefactor of the college.



Steve Wozniak speaks to a sold-out group at Sierra Nevada College in September. Photo/Provided

Siebens-Binz, in her 80s, thawed the audience with her witty introduction of Wozniak, making her a perfect warm-up act, but she also let it be known that the Harold Walter Siebens Chair in Entrepreneurship at SNC, named for her father, is extremely important to her.

Wozniak, 67, the son of an electrical engineer at Lockheed and a homemaker, described himself as a fantastic inventor, a fact which he has proven many times. He was into electronics even as a kid, making things from kits or from his own designs. He said he loved being a ham radio operator as a youngster.

His science fair projects won top prizes. He built a system to show movies in hotels and sold it for 5 cents a pop. He designed and built his own computer, way before computers

became a way of life.

Although he was extremely bright, school bored him. He attended the University of Colorado and flunked out. When he decided to enroll at UC Berkeley in 1971, he failed to graduate, but he did then return to Hewlett-Packard, a company to which he was extremely loyal.

As a teen he met Steve Jobs, whom he describes as an exceptionally effective marketer. Jobs, who worked for Atari, and Wozniak designed a spin-off of Pong, the popular Atari electronic game, which earned them \$750, although Wozniak later learned that their game garnered much more than the paltry \$750. He only saw half of that figure, he said.

Working at night after returning home from his day job at H-P, The Woz built a viable computer. In fact, he said, he gave out the design for free. "I wanted to start a computer revolution," he said, even though HP wasn't interested in getting into the market and was even less interested in his design. The company was betting heavily on handheld calculators.

Jobs, however, saw the possibilities of this new machine and envisioned a computer company selling Woz-designed computers, one that he and Wozniak would start. Jobs wasn't able to convince him to leave H-P. But it didn't take long for them to form a partnership and to dive into the world of business, even though neither one of them had any money. What they did have was a computer and plenty of youthful enthusiasm.

"Steve Jobs saw what Apple could do. I just wanted to be an engineer."

With a \$50,000 order in hand and a loan to carry them through production, Apple was in business—Jobs and Wozniak each owning 45 percent of the company. The other 10 percent was held by an investor who eventually sold out.

By the end of 1978, Apple sales increased tenfold, making Apple one of the fastest growing companies in the United States. Around this time, Wozniak crashed his airplane, nearly killing himself as well as the others, including his future wife. He developed amnesia, from which he took several years to recover—it seems that this was the time he started to re-evaluate his life.

He returned to Cal Berkeley for the second time and again, failed to graduate, but received a degree later in the 1980s. He said he is very interested in the psychology of education and he taught school for several years after leaving Apple. He said he sees the big divide that computers close when it comes to kids and learning. “Computers help kids excel in school,” he told his audience.

He said he likes to surround himself with independent thinkers. “I run into entrepreneurs everywhere. They spin off new products from the various companies they work for then they start their own companies.”

And of course, the Apple story is the epitome of the entrepreneurial spirit. “Apple cared about making products easier. We made easy computers because human needs are important. I decided I wanted to do things the human way.”

The Woz said he’s in love with Siri, the built-in “intelligent assistant” that enables users of Apple iPhone 4S and later and newer iPad and iPod Touch devices to speak natural language voice commands in order to operate the mobile device and its apps.

“Siri was the greatest app ever done,” he said. “Apple bought Siri, but it’s not intelligence, it’s all algorithms.”

A discussion of Siri led to computer intelligence and the worry that maybe computers will one day replace humans in most jobs. “There is no computer that thinks. They don’t say, ‘What shall I do today?’ They have to be programmed by humans.

Computers don't have a personality. They aren't human yet. But computers are faster than humans."

As an example, he talked about the business of buying and selling stocks and said a computer program can consummate stock trades in nano seconds, compared to the time it takes a human.

Computers, he said, are all about assisting humans, not causing them problems. "But I don't think self-driving cars will be viable for another 10-20 years. There are too many unusual situations for self-driving cars to control."

He's devoted to two concepts—honesty and happiness, saying he felt it imperative that he remain loyal to H-P even though he spent his nights working on the Apple computer and operating on very little sleep. "Engineering represents the greatest honesty in the world."

About happiness, he said he wants to be the person who laughs at jokes. Ever the computer techie, he said the emotions of happiness are smiles and frowns.

"Pursue the stuff that makes you happy. You don't have to win an argument. Be glad for who you are. If my car gets scratched, I don't worry about it.

"I put on music festivals. Happiness equals food, fun and friends. Oh, and there might be a fourth F," he laughed.