IN MEMORIAM Klaus R. Dittrich (1950 – 2007)

On November 20th, 2007 Klaus Dittrich suddenly and unexpectedly passed away at the age of 56 while on a sabbatical at HP Labs. His death came as a shock to all who have known him, and to the entire information and database systems community. The hundred or so messages that were exchanged during the first hours after November 20 showed the tremendous outpouring of grief and sympathy, as does the huge number of responses in the electronic condolence book kept by the University of Zurich on whose computer science faculty Klaus had been over the past almost 20 years (http://www.ifi.uzh.ch/ifi/condolence/).

Klaus Dittrich got his diploma and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Karlsruhe. One of us (Peter L.) had the pleasure to work with Klaus for 10 years as a Ph.D. advisor and leader of a research group. From the very beginning Klaus showed all the traits that would distinguish him in the future: unbounded energy, resourcefulness, pleasure in taking initiatives, scientific curiosity, purposefulness and steadiness, and all this paired with a good dose of humor, openness and willingness to support others. Small wonder, then, that early on and during all his years at Karlsruhe he held responsibilities for numerous projects and later on for setting up a large research group dedicated to technology transfer.

Klaus was one of the early minds behind object-oriented technology and an ardent promoter and adopter of the – then new – technology. He started with applying this technology to operating systems, then introduced the technology to data security (this was the topic of his Ph.D. thesis), and only then turned to applying it to database systems. He became widely known for the manifesto on object-oriented databases, a highly influential paper with more than 700 citations, and for his work in engineering databases and their applications to VLSI design and software engineering. Some of this work was done while he spent postdoc time at IBM Research at San Jose. In 1989 he left Karlsruhe and accepted a full professorship with the University of Zurich.

In Zurich Klaus continued to be at the forefront of research on post-relational databases. In addition to continuing his leadership on object-oriented databases, one of the themes to which Klaus and his group made great contributions throughout the nineties was active database technology. This work led to numerous first-rate publications on many topics, such as rule languages for event processing, process specification and collaborative work, and publish-subscribe services. This line of research further evolved into recent work on data integration, metadata, and ontologies.

One of Klaus’s great scholarly strengths has been his strategic foresight and his ability to look across the fence in combining perspectives from different research communities. He was among the pioneers who shaped the roadmap for object-oriented databases. Following the spirit of the CO-DBMS Manifesto, he wrote similarly insightful and inspirational papers on other important directions including active databases, the software engineering and componentization of database systems architectures, and even the publishing culture in our community. The latter two are less well known papers, entitled “Constructing the Next 100 Database Systems” and “The Database Community: Submitting and Publishing Itself to Death!??” and written in 1994 and 1991,
respectively. These are highly recommendable sources on topics that are today more timely than ever.

For our research community, Klaus was a terrific contributor also as a tireless and unselfish organizer. He has served on numerous committees and boards, international ones as well as national ones in Switzerland and Germany, and he always did an extremely thorough and thoughtful job. Many of us greatly benefited from Klaus’s excellent organizational skills and hard work, and his dedication and sense of fairness in helping our community. Klaus co-chaired the 1995 VLDB Conference in Zurich, and he served on the VLDB Endowment’s Board of Trustees for many years, including 6 years as the board’s secretary. In 2005 Klaus became an editor-in-chief of the VLDB Journal, to which he devoted himself with vision and passion. He was so glad to see the completion of the timely special issue on DB-IR integration (Issue 1, 2008) that he had been responsible for. Just a few months ago he did an outstanding job as the chair of the PhD Workshop at the 2007 VLDB Conference.

Klaus Dittrich has been a wonderful colleague. He not only was an excellent researcher who made ground-breaking contributions in areas like object-oriented and active database systems, but he was also a superb supporter of our community who gave a lot to many of us. And he was a great person to interact with: warm and enthusiastic, insightful and creative, and with a very fine sense of humour. Klaus’s untimely passing is a great loss for our community. He will be dearly missed, and he will be most warmly remembered.

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