How Did I Get Here?

Database administration is one of those professions that makes it hard to explain to others what you do for a living. We typically fit in between the people who build servers and the people who need to store and retrieve data from those same servers. We are therefore expected to know and understand a lot about a lot, and it can be overwhelming at times. So much so that you will sometimes stop to take a moment to reflect upon where you are in life and wonder, “How did I get here?”

I am often asked two questions. The first is, “How did you become a DBA?” The second question is, “What does a DBA do, exactly?” This chapter will help to explain the former, and the remaining chapters will help to explain the latter. Becoming a DBA can be a mysterious journey for most. I will share with you my story and the stories of others in an effort to help you better understand how some people end up becoming DBAs.

TIP: Be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it.

In this chapter, we will discuss the following:

1. My journey
2. Other journeys
3. Your journey
4. Staying focused

My Journey

How did I become a DBA? It sure wasn’t the career I dreamed of in elementary school. I probably wanted to be a fireman or a policeman back then.

I can’t say that I planned to become a DBA either, at least not at first, not early in my career. My entry into the DBA world sort of just happened. Some might see it as “dumb luck,” but I prefer the term “smart luck.”
Early Lessons

My first computer? That would be the Commodore VIC-20. I remember saving my money from mowing lawns, my sister driving me to the mall, and buying that all-in-one unit that I could attach to my television with an RF adapter. I also got the datasette, which was nothing more than a cassette tape player, but it allowed me to save programs, which was nice.

I bought a book of programs that I could type myself and run. Did you know that sometimes books have mistakes printed in them? Imagine a computer program in a book that was missing a couple of important characters. I didn’t have to imagine such a thing, because I lived it. I would often find myself debugging programs. To this day, I believe that is the biggest reason I do iterative debugging; I always make small changes and measure the effects as I progress, whereas others like to do a lot of work and try to debug everything afterward.

In addition to being drawn toward computers at an early age, I was also drawn toward mathematics. Both of those fields are analytical in nature and served as a good base for me later in life. Oh, and neither field required me to do a lot of writing, which was nice as well. In fact, I went to college as a math major just to keep the number of term papers to a minimum.

TIP: Going the extra mile and doing a little extra work always pays off in the long run.

Unfortunately, my lack of writing experience caught up with me in graduate school. In my very first class there, the professor told me I needed to write out my solutions; I needed to write out the word two instead of using the numerical 2. And I could not just use =; I had to write equals. It was a painful adjustment for me, but it served me well. By that time in my life, I had learned that the path less traveled usually led me to a better place than I would have imagined.

While in graduate school, I had the option of composing a master’s project as part of earning my degree. Since knowing how doing extra work had always paid off for me in the past, I decided to take on a project. The math and astronomy departments at Washington State University (WSU) were joined at the time, and I had a natural love for all things extraterrestrial (and still do). I asked one of the astronomy professors if he would work with me on a project and he agreed.

My project was titled “The Interstellar Radiation Field of Globular Clusters” and involved quite a bit of programming. Not Commodore VIC-20 programming; we are talking FORTRAN77, Sun boxes, astrophysical equations, arrays, telescopes, charts, graphs, and even LaTeX. I was exposed to a lot of programming in a very short time, and left WSU with a master of science (MS) in mathematics and enough programming experience to help me land a job.