My First EuroBSDCon: A New Organizer's Perspective

BY KATIE MCMILLAN

I became involved in EuroBSDCon during the Covid pandemic. It was September 2020, and I didn't know the Board of Directors for the EuroBSDCon Foundation (henceforth referred to as "the Foundation"), and only knew of some of the members of the organizing committee and selection committee from other conferences like BSDCan. EuroBSDCon 2020 had been cancelled as had BSDCan 2021, and EuroBSDCon 2021 was looking dicey too. There wasn't much enthusiasm for a virtual conference (or "online" conference, which sounded slightly better than "virtual", but still bad).

I will be specific about how I got involved, because I think it's important for people to know what to do if they want to get involved in conferences and administrative aspects of open source projects, especially internationally. I am a Canadian woman and would encourage anyone who wants to get involved in open source projects to reach out to key people on the projects, starting with Boards of Directors. We are all humans, and volunteering/donating (whether it be lines of code, bug fixes, porting, vulnerability discoveries, monetary donations, hosting booths at conferences, giving talks, administrative support, documentation, project management, community building, advocacy, etc.) makes a great impression. There are many ways to give back to open source projects, which are bringing humankind some of the best hardware and software available today.

In this case, I emailed the Foundation that runs EuroBSDCon to ask how to get involved. I kept it short, and said:

Hello,
I would like to volunteer for EuroBSDCon 2021 and am wondering what the best way is to get involved? I live in Ottawa, Canada, and normally volunteer for BSDCan, but as it has been cancelled for 2021 I would like to divert my energy to EuroBSDCon.
Thank you,
Katie

And a couple of weeks later I was managing the website. Well, no, it wasn't quite that simple. Turns out I was signing on to learn Wordpress and inherit a website for a conference which may or may not happen. Some plugins, content, assets, different users, SEO configurations, a theme…, but while inheriting the site would also seem scary in the sense of entering into a "decision-by-committee" process with the Foundation, who were mysterious (to someone who

doesn't use social media), it ended up not being like that at all. In fact, they wanted someone to help with the website, and were happy that I wanted to contribute in this way. So, I started learning to use Wordpress as a CMS, picking up HTML and CSS, and with Lighthouse audits and SEO tools, realized how powerful open source tools were for web development. The board members acted as experienced guides; I felt accompanied, assisted, and appreciated., I developed at my own pace, and that worked really well. When I screwed up and crashed the website (which only happened once or twice) everyone was fine with that too. What it highlighted to me, is that learning is a continuous process, and I wasn't just going to learn web development, get my gold star, and be finished. With their support I'm continuing to develop and learn new things all the time.

The Conference

Some of us attended the conference online and others in person; it really ended up being a hybrid event. In all, we had approximately 500 registrations, reaching 100 simultaneous attendees. It was amazing to see so many great talks, questions, and to put faces to names. For me, it was particularly well-timed as PGDay Austria was being held in-person at the same time, so I was able to attend that while I was in Vienna. It was so nice to attend in-person, as, due to the pandemic, I hadn't travelled for a long time before that. I really wanted to be there to help support the community and tools. I was pleasantly surprised when Austrian locals showed up to attend and support in person!

For the conference infrastructure we leveraged a combination of tools, some open source some closed source. Kristof Provost brought key insights to ensuring that the tools were going to work harmoniously and provide a streamlined experience. We aimed to somewhat resemble (or be inspired by) the in-person conference experience with moderated talk rooms, allowing for engagement with speakers and Q/A sessions, with social coffee periods and sponsor booths in a separate area. My favorite part was using the tool I supported from the beginning of the conference organization: Big Blue Button. We used it as our video conference and recording software: this open source software is awesome! I use it all the time to whip up a quick meeting room, and it is one of the favorite open source tools in my toolbox, especially after it worked so well for an online conference of this size.

The other neat part about using Big Blue Button was our ability to find a fantastic provider of hosting, support, and video editing services. Since it's open source, we were able to be highly selective, and look everywhere, and we ended up choosing a company called RiAdvice, based in Tunisia. The CEO, Ghazi Triki, and his team were fantastic to work with and it really felt like having a strategic partner who was part of the team. We were grateful to the team at RiAdvice for all of their help with planning, execution, support, and post conference activities

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Conference Reports
EuroBSDCon 2021

including video editing. Having this level of friendly, professional support really added to the fun and reduced the stress, of the whole event. It was great to be a part of such an innovative and collaborative conference experience and to be able to leverage open source software for an open source software conference.
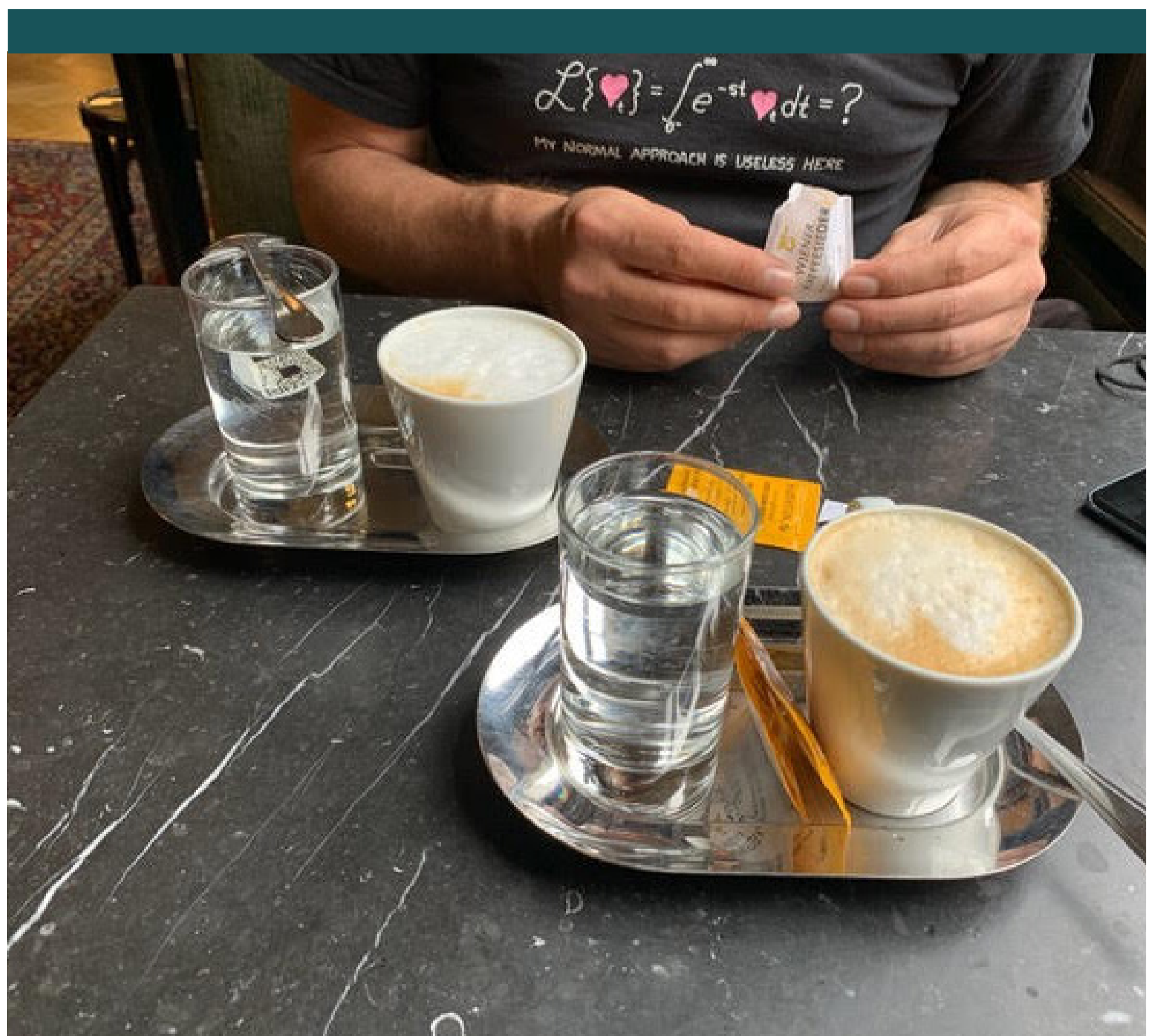
I appreciate how included I felt as a woman at the conference. Not only did the bathroom doors have inclusive signs on them, but everyone made me feel welcome and part of the team. So much so, in fact, that I have since formally joined the Board of Directors for the Foundation. I do ask—especially if you're a person identifying as any gender other than male and reading this—that you consider submitting a talk abstract or volunteering at next year's conference!

Why I'll Do it Again Next Year

The coffee was spectacular. Okay, that's not the only reason, but you absolutely must add "drink a melange in Vienna" to your Bucket List, it is a wonderful experience. Vienna is a truly breathtaking city, with its fabulous architecture, food, monuments, shopping, theatre, palaces, public transportation — I encourage everyone to travel to this gorgeous city.

I'll definitely do it again next year because of the people. I loved the eclectic group of people and was touched by the hospitality and inclusion. I laughed so hard, and not just when Henning Brauer tasted a wild plant that was growing on the SBA Research terrace. He was fine, but I have decided to update my First Aid and CPR certificate for next year's conference.

At the end of the day, conferences and other types of community building, networking, professional development, and engagement activities are critical to the successxof open source projects of all kinds. These are community projects leveraging transparent community-driven development. This approach fosters the sustainability, advanced security, vendor neutrality, social positivity, inclusivity, innovation, and interoperability of the projects. It also encourages international human connections and relationships. Let's not lose sight of how important human connections are in this digital world. Sometimes it is easy to feel like

an island when it feels like those around you don't share your interests.

I thank the EuroBSDCon Foundation Board, Conference Sponsors, Organizing Committee, Selection Committee, and Attendees for allowing me to be part of something so important to foster the diversity, creativity, comradery, sense of humor, and endurance of the BSD international community.

My friends, see you next year and I wish you a "Gute Fahrt!"

KATIE MCMILLAN has worked in Canadian healthcare since 2004; she began her career at Health Canada assisting with the development of the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI). She has continued in health roles, building her career around her love for standards, innovation and digital excellence. With a focus on empowering digital strategies with security and interoperability, which has led her to open-source solutions, she has had job titles such as GIS Analyst, Application Services Consultant, and Digital Strategy and Excellence Lead. Since 2021 she has broadened her vision of the healthcare system, and now works for an established Canadian marketing, applications, and software vendor, Snap360. She continues to participate in the advancement of digital health through use, development, and promotion of open-source technologies such as OSCAR EMR, R/R Studio, PostgreSQL, Mirth Connect, *BSD, WordPress, and HL7. Katie enjoys hiking, coffee, cross-country skiing, sudokus, horse-back riding, and the Bay of Quinte.

EuroBSDCon 2021: Report by René Ladan

Q = imaginary interviewer

R = René

Q: How did you get involved with the EuroBSDCon Foundation?
R: I have been using FreeBSD since 2003 after dabbling for a bit with some Linux distributions. I started contributing to the (now defunct) Dutch translation of the FreeBSD Handbook and was consequently rewarded with a doc commit bit in 2008. I made the same mistake with ports land and was faced with a ports commit bit in 2010. I have been on the Ports Management Team (portmgr@) since 2016 where I mostly assume the role of secretary.

Q: OK, but what about the EuroBSDCon Foundation?
R: Ah, yes, so because I was following some mailing lists, I read about this conference in Canada called BSDCan. I figured at that moment that developers actually meet in person from time to time, which was a nice surprise. So, I ended up debuting my BSD conference visits with BSDCan in 2010. Unfortunately, I couldn't visit EuroBSDCon in 2010 because of work obligations, but I attended it in 2011 and haven't skipped a year of EuroBSDCon since.

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   This non-stop attendance also drew the attention of the EuroBSDCon Foundation in 2016, which resulted in me being pulled over during dinner to join a board meeting the next day. During that meeting, it turned out that they were looking for some more Dutch members because of (by)laws, as the Foundation is Dutch and I happen to be Dutch too. I agreed to join the board and have been doing secretary work ever since—things like proposing agendas and minuting, but also helping out attendees with embassy paperwork.

Q: What do the conferences that you help organize look like?
R: So, normally, the EuroBSDCon is an in-person event, but the COVID pandemic changed the rules. We decided to completely cancel the 2020 edition because BSDCan already went virtual and we felt a second online conference that year wouldn't add much. We had some hope that this year's conference could be held in person again, probably on a smaller scale—with prob-

ably mostly European attendees. But we had to organize an online component to cater to our overseas attendees anyway, so we figured it was easier to just keep it online.

Q: Did you ever organize an online conference before?
R: While we didn't have to organize any local component, we did have to learn how to organize an online conference from scratch. We visited some other online conferences just to take a peek at how they did things. We settled on using BigBlueButton for the talks and Spatial.chat for the hallway track.

We chose two services because BigBlueButton had more mature recording capabilities at the time and an API that we could use to schedule the recordings, while Spatial.chat provided a real nice online hallway experience.

I think the conference was a success despite being online. We did feel the interaction with people was missing, giving a talk or making announcements in front of a screen just isn't the same as with a crowd sitting in front of you. We held an unofficial, in-person mini-conference in Vienna which attracted some people from the organization and some local people—so that gave us the opportunity to still socialize a bit before, during, and after the conference.

Q: Would you organize another conference?
R: Yes, for multiple reasons.

First of all, it is lots of fun to attend these conferences, with a new city to visit each year. So, these conferences are also a kind of mini holiday for me. The talks provide insight into the current state of affairs, but more importantly, the hallway track allows me to catch up with people which I might not have seen for a year or longer. While I mostly do invisible work for most people, the work in itself does enable several people to attend each year and it also keeps the machinery going.

Let's hope that work is for a full, in-person conference in Vienna (again) later this year!

RENÉ LADAN studied computing science at the Eindhoven University of Technology where he graduated in 2006. After that he has worked at various companies, including the university itself. He currently works as a software engineer at Carapax IT.

René started his open source shadow career with some small projects on Sourceforge but it really took off when he started to work on FreeBSD in 2004. Meanwhile, he has been awarded both a documentation and a ports commit bit and is now part of the Ports Management Team (aka portmgr@). After visiting too many instances of EuroBSDCon, he was drawn into the accompanying Foundation in 2016 and assumes the role of secretary ever since.

When not doing BSD stuff and still in nerd mode, he likes to tinker with his homebrew time station receivers. Outside of technical things, René likes to hike, puzzle, and work in his parents' garden.