



# The FreeBSD Foundation at 15

**by Justin Gibbs** / Some 15 years later, the FreeBSD Foundation continues to grow the ways it supports the FreeBSD community. From funded development projects and promotion of FreeBSD, to providing legal support and bringing our community together at conferences and summits, the FreeBSD Foundation compliments the hard work of FreeBSD's contributors, focusing on areas that are underserved in an all volunteer project.



We were not always so capable, but during our 15 years the vision to get us here has not changed. By telling the story of our origin—why I felt the FreeBSD Foundation had to exist—I hope to better explain our mission and how we'll continue to move forward in the next 15 years. The story begins during the early days of the FreeBSD Project.

I started my involvement with FreeBSD on a purely technical level. Filled with curiosity and an appetite for learning, I saw FreeBSD as an incomplete puzzle. Creating new pieces and putting them in place was addictive; finding out that my solutions worked for others, immensely satisfying. I had stumbled upon a technical playground where I could share my ideas and build great things without the impractical schedules and other constraints I found when writing software for school or work.

The founders of this “FreeBSD playground” may not have realized exactly what they were creating. The goal was to carry on the BSD tradition, challenge ourselves to create the “best UNIX,” and to have fun. But as the project grew, it became clear that someone had to be responsible for the playground: the grass needed to be cut, the play equipment maintained, and the occasional fight broken up. To fill this role, without much desire or inclination to be managers, the founders and a few of the early technical contributors to the project came together to form the FreeBSD Core Team.

Late in 1993, I was invited to join the

FreeBSD Core Team. In those days, this was how the project acknowledged technical expertise—being on the Core Team lent weight to your arguments on technical matters. It was a tremendous honor and one I readily accepted. What I didn't fully grasp was that I was accepting a management position. Lacking the skill set or natural talent for “cat herding,” I was now one of a handful of volunteers—hackers really—responsible for guiding FreeBSD forward.

The next seven years that I served on the FreeBSD Core Team was an amazing experience. Reluctant volunteer managers attempting to manage a volunteer community may sound like a recipe for disaster. However, it worked surprisingly well. We were young, fiercely loyal, and had enviously large amounts of spare time to dedicate to the project. With enough effort and sheer will, there is almost nothing you cannot do. But it became clear to me that as a group of technophiles, many of the things we had to do were things we didn't enjoy doing. Making the project function and grow took time away from the coding projects I loved. For me, this wasn't sustainable.

In 1999, two years into a serious relationship, my thoughts turned to marriage and raising a family. It was obvious that my time commitment to the FreeBSD Project would have to change, but I didn't want to give any less to a community that had given me so much in return. I also wanted to really enjoy the time that I chose to give to the project.

That same year, the FreeBSD Core Team was looking for a way to accept the transfer of the

FreeBSD trademark from Walnut Creek CDROM. FreeBSD is a collection of individuals, not a formal legal entity. We needed a structure for safeguarding the intellectual property of the project. In researching how a nonprofit company might fit this role, I found a potential solution to both problems. A “FreeBSD Foundation” could certainly hold the trademark. It could also be a sustainable way for me to give back to the project in ways I could never achieve as a single volunteer.

On March 15, 2000, the FreeBSD Foundation was born. The combination of a tiny budget, piles of paperwork, filing and legal fees, and letters to and from the IRS made for a slow and inauspicious beginning. During some particularly frustrating times, it was hard to believe my original goals were attainable. The FreeBSD Foundation still needed me for constant care and feeding. I rarely wrote code for FreeBSD in my spare time. I looked forward to the day when the Foundation would be able to bring in expertise from outside the Project to help with marketing and legal issues, while freeing volunteers to work on the things they loved.

In December 2000, the Foundation received provisional, 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. The first major hurdle had been cleared. Jumping those that followed became progressively easier: learning the rules of maintaining nonprofit status, setting up to legally receive donations, figuring out basic accounting. Finally, on June 27, 2001, the FreeBSD Foundation was publicly announced to the world.

<http://docs.freebsd.org/cgi/getmsg.cgi?fetch=6629+0+archive/2001/freebsd-announce/20010701.freebsd-announce>

Now the real work began to transform the Foundation from a mere paper entity into an asset to the FreeBSD community. We took ownership of and started to protect the FreeBSD trademark. We worked with Sun to license FreeBSD Java binaries. We funded the early work on network scalability for SMP systems. We fostered nascent BSD conferences. These early accomplishments proved the value of the FreeBSD Foundation. But it wasn't yet sustainable.

Prior to 2006, all of the Foundation's activities were managed by volunteers. Jonathan Bresler and John Polstra served as officers and provided tremendous amounts of support during the early life of the FreeBSD Foundation. Over time, more volunteers agreed to participate on the Foundation's board and help grow its capabilities. However, the Foundation's address was still my house. The Foundation's phone number still rang my phone. I had a day job and family to care for. The Foundation needed someone

to manage it on a daily basis or it would never reach its full potential.

Having no idea where to start, I asked the HR director at my work for advice on hiring the FreeBSD Foundation's first employee. Kathy Stoltz introduced me to her longtime friend, Deb Goodkin. Deb has been serving the FreeBSD Foundation, now as its executive director, ever since. I feel very lucky to have found such a capable steward for the FreeBSD Foundation. More importantly, she has worked with the Foundation board to create policies and a structure to ensure, as volunteers, board members, and staff come or go, that the FreeBSD Foundation will survive and continue its work supporting the FreeBSD Project.

This journey has taught me several things. FreeBSD is about much more than writing documentation or code and building a system. As a community, we need to understand that, and seek creative ways to achieve the goals we aren't best equipped to tackle as volunteers. The work we enjoy doing can have a tremendous impact on our world. But for that to happen, we must promote it, while making it easier to use and more accessible to researchers, educators, and builders of commercial products. The FreeBSD Foundation is a vehicle for performing this necessary work—for meeting challenges, in cooperation with the FreeBSD community, that seem impossible for the FreeBSD Project to conquer on its own. This is why I have invested so much to make the FreeBSD Foundation a reality.

The journey is not over. The work is not done. I want to thank the FreeBSD Foundation staff, former and current board members, and our donors for making our achievements possible. To the many users of FreeBSD we've talked to, thank you for your words of encouragement and your challenges to do even more.

Finally, as founder and president of the FreeBSD Foundation, I want to thank the FreeBSD community for your trust. Holding the FreeBSD trademark and supporting the FreeBSD Project is a privilege. The FreeBSD Foundation will continue to grow and the faces of those running it may change, but our commitment to this community and keeping your trust will always remain the same. ●

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