Barbara Bry

Barbara Bry is a serial entrepreneur who is currently the chief operating officer for Blackbird Ventures that invests in and incubates early stage technology companies. In addition, she and her husband Neil Senturia teach entrepreneurship at UC San Diego and write a weekly column on entrepreneurship for U-T San Diego. The companies / organizations that she helped to start include Proflowers, Provide Commerce, San Diego Athena, and Voice of San Diego. In addition, she was the associate director of CONNECT during its early years, and she developed many of CONNECT’s signature programs including Springboard and The Most Innovative New Products Awards.

She has received numerous honors including the KPBS-Local Heroes Award, the CONNECT Lifetime Contribution Award/Technology, the Athena Founder Award, recognition as a “Woman Who Means Business” by the San Diego Business Journal, the Sara Moser award from Planned Parenthood in recognition of her advocacy efforts for women, and she has been inducted into the San Diego Women’s Hall of Fame.

Barbara has a Bachelor’s degree in sociology and a Master’s degree in education from the University of Pennsylvania, and she earned a Master’s in business administration degree from the Harvard Business School. She and her husband Neil have four children between the ages of 27 and 31.
SIMARD: Can you tell me a little bit about the genesis of CONNECT in 1985?

BRY: Sure. I wasn’t at the founding, so this is second hand.

SIMARD: Yeah.

BRY: I was involved in a peripheral way. In the early 1980s San Diego competed for something called MCC, the Micro Computer Consortium, and we competed with cities all over the country to get this, and Austin won. We were the finalists. Austin and San Diego were the two finalists. A retired admiral, named Bobby Inman, was the head of it and it was very high profile. It turned out not to be such a big deal, [Laugh] but at the time . . .

SIMARD: At the time it was a big deal?

BRY: Right. We lost. One reason, Bobby Inman told San Diego, that we lost was because there was very little interaction between the university and the community.

SIMARD: Interesting.

BRY: Dan Peg who is at Leap Wireless I believe, he was then the president of the San Diego
economic development corporation. So he'd been there, and I was writing about this for the
*L.A. Times*, so that's how I was peripherally involved.

**SIMARD:** Oh, interesting.

**BRY:** I was a business writer at the *L.A. Times*. He was thinking, "We've got to do something
to get the university more involved in the community." Other business leaders were starting
to think that at the same time. A group of people approached, I think, Dick Atkinson, who was
then the chancellor. Dick got Mary involved, and out of all of that came CONNECT.

**SIMARD:** Okay.

**BRY:** CONNECT was formally launched in the fall of 1985. They did a seminar on raising
capital, but there was no permanent staff at that point. Mary had people at Extension who
worked for her and who helped organize it. Then they started to look for a director, a full-time
director, and found Bill Otterson who was a successful retired entrepreneur. It's a shame you
can't interview him, because he's dead. He was hired in March of '86. At that point in time I
had a child who was a year old and I had been out of the workforce, but I was maybe thinking
about going back to work. I had a neighbor who was a venture capitalist who was one of the
founders of CONNECT. His name is Buzz Woolley. You may want to interview Buzz. I had
worked for him a little bit when he was a venture capitalist, but he was retired also at that
time. He had actually funded Bill's company that had been so successful. I mean, it's such a
little world in San Diego. He knew Bill was a great idea person, but Bill would never make
sure things got done. So, he said, "Well, Bill, you really need somebody like Barbara Bry. She
doesn't want to work full-time, which is fine. She'll just come in and make sure that things get
done." And that's how I ended up at CONNECT, [Laugh] in the spring of '86. The deal was,
"You can have flexible hours" and I had two kids at that time.

**SIMARD:** Yeah. You must have been busy?
BRY: Yeah.

SIMARD: I only have one, and whew!

BRY: Yeah. [Laugh] I didn't want to have a 9 to 5 job, but I wanted to do something interesting, and with purpose.

SIMARD: Which is often difficult to find.

BRY: Well, believe me, I did not get paid well. [Laughter] I made up for it later, but . . .

SIMARD: Working for a university is never – yeah.

BRY: Yeah.

SIMARD: Also now, you're famous because of your work there. So, Bill Otterson was not employed at UCSD at that time? He was a retired entrepreneur?

BRY: He was a retired entrepreneur. And they . . .

SIMARD: And they brought him in?

BRY: They brought him in six months after the program started. There is actually a case study that some professors at Pepperdine wrote about us. I have it at home. It's quite good, I'll Xerox it for you.

SIMARD: I've been looking for that.

BRY: It involved Ron Stead and Bill. I have it at home. I need to bring it in anyway. I could Xerox it.

SIMARD: Great. And so, what was your original vision?

BRY: The vision hasn't changed too much, which is good and bad, because things have to
change [Laugh] or they die. The formal name was the UCSD Program in Technology and
Entrepreneurship. That’s certainly a mouthful. So, very quickly a local PR firm named us
CONNECT. This was actually done before Bill and I got there. We were CONNECT because we
were connecting technology entrepreneurs with the resources they need for success, which
were technical, financial, managerial, teaching them how to run businesses. Lots of them are
scientists and engineers. And we provided technical resources, by linking them to the
research capabilities of the university.

SIMARD: Did you cater a lot to university professors who wanted to start a company on the
side, or was it more widespread community?

BRY: It was more widespread community, but at various points we tracked it. About a third
of the people we worked with had a UCSD link.

SIMARD: Oh.

BRY: Meaning that at least the technology came out of UCSD, or they were alumni of UCSD, or
they were on the staff at UCSD. About a third of the people had a link to UCSD, but they didn’t
have to.

SIMARD: No. Was the original CONNECT more involved in the biotech industry?

BRY: No, we were involved in both.

SIMARD: Both?

BRY: Irwin Jacobs was on the founding committee.

SIMARD: Already? Okay.

BRY: Yeah. He was starting Qualcomm at about the same time that CONNECT was getting
started. I have a picture of Irwin, and me, and Bill at one of the first CONNECT seminars in April of that year. We were focused on the entire technology industry: software, telecom, biotech, biomed, everything.

**SIMARD:** Any focus on the science industry in the area also?

**BRY:** Sure. Yeah. I mean, if they were technology related.

**SIMARD:** Right. High tech?

**BRY:** Orincon, General Atomics, and all those kinds of companies were involved with SAIC.

**SIMARD:** SAIC? Okay.

**BRY:** Yeah. All of them were involved in CONNECT. Right.

**SIMARD:** Can you tell me, from your standpoint, what are the biggest success stories to emerge out of CONNECT?

**BRY:** You know I left seven years ago?

**SIMARD:** I did.

**BRY:** Yeah. All of them were involved in CONNECT. Right.

**SIMARD:** Can you tell me, from your standpoint, what are the biggest success stories to emerge out of CONNECT?

**BRY:** You know I left seven years ago?

**SIMARD:** I did.

**BRY:** So, well one of the biggest . . .

**SIMARD:** When you were there.

**BRY:** When I was there? One of the biggest was at the raising capital seminar in September of '95 before Bill and I joined. At the seminar David Hale gets up to speak. David is, at the time, the CEO of Hybritech, which was just about to be acquired by Eli Lilly. At the seminar are two UCSD researchers, called Harry Gruber and Paul Laikind. They were already thinking about a company called Gensia, which then became Gensia. David then left Hybritech and became the
CEO of Gensia. Then they went on to start another company called Viagene, which then became something else. Actually, Paul and Harry are still very much around. Paul is now CEO of another company. You could probably type his name into Google and find him. Harry then went on to Intervu, which had nothing to do with biotech. It was bought by Akamai for hundreds of millions of dollars, and Harry got his money out before the world fell apart. He’s now doing a company called Kintera, which does CRM software for nonprofits. When you just think of all the things that came out of that, that was one of our early success stories. You know what I should have brought? I might still have them at home. They’re all these CONNECT directories. But . . .

**SIMARD:** So, you have the CONNECT directories?

**BRY:** Carole Ekstrom will. Do you know Carole?

**SIMARD:** No.

**BRY:** I can give you how to get hold. Carole was the director of membership at CONNECT, and putting together the directory was her job. I’ll give you where she works right now, because you should interview Carole. She’ll talk your ear off.

**SIMARD:** Oh, that’ll be great.

**BRY:** She works at a company called Office Pavilion. It’s such a little world. Her boss is in my TEC group. It’s because I met her boss and then Mickey joined. This is a little town. Carole would have all the directories -- I might have saved some at home, but I didn’t . . .

**SIMARD:** That’s great.

**BRY:** If anybody has them Carole does. At certain moments I’ve just thrown everything away. But, Carole would probably show people, associates or whomever, these things to help her get

*Interview conducted by Caroline Simard, PhD, on November 4, 2003*
a job. So, that was a big success story.

SIMARD: Anything that comes up in the wireless or telecom industry? Basically there you have the sum of the whole biotech family?

BRY: Right. Which all came out of Hybritech.

SIMARD: Right. Right.

BRY: We helped lots of companies raise money and every year we used to do a Financial Forum where we would have venture capitalists come and the entrepreneurs could present. We also did a biotechnology corporate partnering forum, and we used to track who raised money every year, but I don’t have any of those. Probably CONNECT has kept some of that. We would do the forum and then nine months later we’d follow up and find out who had raised money. I was always careful about tracking all of this, because it was very nice to have data. We helped companies raise X-hundred million and I’d know who did what. But, it was seven years ago. I just can’t . . .

SIMARD: Well, that’s just great.

BRY: My current husband and I started a company and we were certainly helped by CONNECT.

SIMARD: What was the company?

BRY: Our company was called Atcom, and we were the first to do internet and email kiosks and high-speed internet access in hotel rooms.

SIMARD: Oh wow.

BRY: Yeah. And we raised $3 million. I have a Harvard MBA, but I joked that I got a second
MBA at CONNECT. We raised $3 million in friends and family money, and we raised $5 million in venture capital, and then we sold the company for $80 million.

SIMARD: How did you end up in San Diego after your Harvard MBA?

BRY: I married somebody here.

SIMARD: Okay.

BRY: Yeah. It was not where I wanted to be, believe me. [Laugh]

SIMARD: That's okay.

BRY: I thought it was the end of the world back then.

SIMARD: Really?

BRY: Yeah. But I hope CONNECT has kept the data, you know.

SIMARD: I hope so. I don't know.

BRY: The case study should have some stuff in it.

SIMARD: Great. Yeah, that'll be very useful. I'm trying to also find out about the relationship with the different UCSD programs. How did you interface with UCSD? Was there something with the Tech Transfer Office?

BRY: We sat in University Extension, which was probably a good place to be housed.

Because, if you put us in the Department of Biology, then it would have only been for biologists. If you put us in Engineering, the same thing. And if you put us in the Tech Transfer Office, oh my god, everybody still hates the Tech Transfer Office.

SIMARD: Right. Right. [Laugh]
BRY: We were in this neutral place where we could work with everybody. I remember in the late '80s UCSD started the Center for Molecular Genetics, and we helped them raise some money. We helped them put on a symposium. We helped them develop a series to interact with industry. We worked with professors from any department who had ideas for businesses. One of the professors we actually worked with was Ramesh Jain. He just left, I believe. He started a company called Virage. I think that's still around. I'll type him into Google. They moved to northern California, unfortunately. (Typing) He then started another company called Praja, that went bankrupt, but [Laugh] that's another story. Yeah, Virage.com. They're still around.

SIMARD: What do they do?

BRY: What do they do? I never could understand what they did. [Laugh]

SIMARD: I can Google it.

BRY: You can look at their website. They're actually still around. Company fact sheet. "Number one provider of video enriched media communication software."

SIMARD: So if a professor came to you and said, "I'd like to start this company," then I guess it was not in your business to say, "Go to TTIPS [Technology Transfer and Intellectual Property Service] to get a patent first"? Or . . .

BRY: No, we would tell them that. If they were at UCSD we would tell them they had to go over to the Tech Transfer Office.

SIMARD: Right. And then they can come see you when it's time for them to raise the resources?

BRY: Right. Actually, most of them were savvy enough to have done that.
BRY: At that moment in time we actually had a very good relationship with the Tech Transfer Office. A guy named Marty Rachmiller was the head of it. A guy named Larry Brand was there. Larry may still be there. They participated actively in what CONNECT did.

SIMARD: Yeah. Okay.

BRY: We had a very good relationship. They’d actually refer people to us. Larry sat on the Advisory Committee for a Biotechnology Corporate Partnership Forum. It was a very good working relationship back then. I have no idea what it is today.

SIMARD: How did you identify potentially successful companies or ideas back then?

BRY: It wasn’t our job to identify them.

SIMARD: Okay. Okay.

BRY: We’re just here to provide an opportunity for anybody.

SIMARD: Exactly. You provided the forum and then if it was meant to be funded . . .

BRY: Yeah. For the Financial Forum we used to get over a hundred business plans for thirty-five slots, and it wasn’t Bill and I who chose the thirty-five. We had an Advisory Committee of successful CEOs and people from the law firms and banks. They selected.

SIMARD: Okay.

BRY: Yeah. Not us. [Laugh]

SIMARD: All right. How did membership grow over time?

BRY: When Bill and I got there in the spring of ’86, they had raised $100,000 by telling some
companies, "Pay $2,500 once and we’ll never need money from you again." Most of it had been spent by the time we got there. Maybe there was $25,000 left. We realized this could not be a self-supporting business model in terms of the startup companies being able to fund it. So, we very quickly developed a sponsorship model and told the service firms that it was, at that point, $2,000 a year. Some people wanted us to make it $1,000 and we said, "No. Make it two, because if they're going to spend one, they're going to spend two." And we said, "With one, we have to get twice as many." We don't want to do that. Then also, for each event we did we raised sponsorship money. At the beginning we only raised money from the service ones, and a year later I said, "This is ridiculous. A lot of the technology companies can afford to pay something," and I said, "They should pay something, even if it's only $100." Then we started memberships, which were on a sliding scale of $100 to $2,500 depending on your size. So, the big ones paid the same as the service providers.

SIMARD: All right. The membership grew pretty quickly then?

BRY: It grew over time. When I left CONNECT in '96 we had over 500 members and sponsors. It was only seven years ago, and I have no idea what it is today.

SIMARD: I have the latest directory. Just . . .

BRY: Yeah. I didn't even know they printed one in years.

SIMARD: Yeah.

BRY: Well, good.

SIMARD: They printed one. I got it last summer. It's great. [Laugh]

BRY: Our budget was close to $2 million, and I know it's about half that now. The peak was really '96-'97. Part of it's because Athena was a part of CONNECT and it is separate now. But .
SIMARD: Did you help start Athena?

BRY: I did start Athena. I started it as a part of CONNECT and then it split off from CONNECT but stayed within Extension.

SIMARD: Athena was specifically geared for women?

BRY: Yes. Always.

SIMARD: Why did you decide to start it?

BRY: This was the late '80s and we started seeing more women coming to our events. It was just an idea to start having lunch with some of them. We just started it as informal lunches with the women who were coming to our events. Hopefully you’ll be interviewing Martha Dennis, if you haven’t already.

SIMARD: This morning I did.

BRY: Oh, okay. She hosted the first Athena event at her office.

SIMARD: Wow.

BRY: Which was then PCSI, Pacific Communications Sciences.

SIMARD: I know, biotech and wireless were very male-dominated industries.

BRY: Yeah. Karen Klaus hosted one of the first Athenas at Hybritech. She was then the VP of Strategic Planning at Hybritech. She’s now chief operating officer of a company in Orange County, but still lives here.

SIMARD: Okay. I think I’m almost finished. If you can speculate a little bit, do you think there

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were any policies at the city/county level, in San Diego in general, that made it a favorable environment for entrepreneurs?

BRY: That's funny. I never thought of that as one of our success factors. I should have read the case study before today because it would have refreshed my memory. But, we used to go down a list of reasons why we thought CONNECT had been successful. The first was, we were at the university. So we were in a prestigious place that was a neutral place. Number two, we had widespread community support from the beginning, across all industries, and we had service providers who were willing to share. We developed our first database because all the service providers gave us all their client names.

SIMARD: Oh. [Laugh]

BRY: Third, we thought the geography of San Diego was favorable, that we're very cohesive, while in L.A. everything's just too spread out. We felt the geography helped us. Back to the university one, we felt being in Extension at the university was key. Not just being at UCSD, but being at Extension. Those were some of the reasons.

SIMARD: More neutral?

BRY: And I don't know what number this is, four, we felt the fact that we had entrepreneurial leadership, that we were led by Bill Otterson, who was a successful entrepreneur. We were not led by a business school professor.

SIMARD: Right. They often don't speak exactly the same language, and that would have been difficult. Did you have some professors that came and gave seminars?

BRY: UCSD had no business school, which may have been a blessing. Oh, and then . . .

SIMARD: Because they would have appropriated it?
BRY: They would have appropriated it. It was, "Oh, you’re not academically appropriate. You don’t meet the criteria of the Academic Senate. You and Bill don’t have PhDs."

SIMARD: And they wouldn’t have been as . . .

BRY: Hands on, or respectful of our community.

SIMARD: Exactly.

BRY: Then the fifth thing is we were self-supporting, and self-supporting from the private sector. We had to raise money every year from membership sponsorship, fees for our programs, to stay in business. We had customers. That was very important.

SIMARD: So, you were seen as there to help them, and not as part of the university or the university mission?

BRY: Yes.

SIMARD: Right. Okay. I have one last thing I want to clarify, because I know you’re very busy. What were the different offerings? There were financial seminars, and then …

BRY: We had a series of monthly seminars on different topics related to starting and growing a technology company. It might be raising money, marketing, protecting your intellectual property, recruiting and retaining. Then we started a more formal, structured class that was a nine-week class about starting and growing a company. We’d go with the same thirty-five people through the class, and over time, we recruited different people to teach it. Then we would do forums, like we did the Financial Forum every February and we attracted venture capitalists to listen to business plans from entrepreneurs. That was a big deal, a two-day event. One day for life sciences and one day for everything else. Then in the fall we did the Biotechnology Corporate Partnership Forum, which actually was our biggest revenue
generator. That usually generated about $300,000 in revenue back then, between the sponsorships and the fees. You could charge pharmaceutical companies a good deal of money to come. Then I started a program called Springboard, which still exists, which was to help early-stage companies. We started this because more companies started coming to us needing help and there was only Bill and me who could really do it. We realized we needed a format. Also, we didn’t want to be in the position of critiquing people. We needed to be more neutral. With Springboard we were able to put together informal Boards of Directors who were experts and they could offer the advice. When I left we were doing one to two a week. I have no idea what it is today. It’s a different venture capital climate today too. It’s much different. Every summer we’d do the Springboard lunch and we’d pick the best five companies. Oh, I have a wonderful success story from that.

SIMARD: Oh good.

BRY: We picked the best five companies to present. The wonderful story is Judith Zyskind, who is a professor at San Diego State, and she, believe it or not, is older than me. At the time she must have been in her fifties. She comes to see me in my last days at CONNECT. In ’97 I was still there a little bit, some of the time. She has developed technology in the biotechnology area. She thinks it has commercial potential. What should she do? This is June, and I know the Springboard lunch is in August. I know nothing about biotechnology, but I know this is a very credible woman and we’ve got to do something right away. We literally had a Springboard for her the next week. She's great. I mean "great" in terms of its good technology. We have her present at the lunch in August and she raises venture capital as a result of that lunch. There were two venture capitalists in the audience. This is a different time, ’97. They both offer her money. The company is called Elitra Pharmaceuticals. It's still very much around. It's raised a zillion dollars. She was a scientific advisor for a while, but is
SIMARD: Judith went back?

BRY: Yeah. Judith is back at San Diego State as a full-time professor if you're interested in talking to her.

SIMARD: And then, you also had the CONNECT awards? The best...

BRY: I started Most Innovative New Product Awards. This would have been like '88. Imperial Bank, which I don't think exists anymore, wanted to fund something. I had breakfast with Cub Parker, who was then the regional head, and he said, "I want to fund something." I said, "Well, Ernst & Young is already doing Entrepreneur of the Year. We need to do something different." I said, "Let's recognize the inventors," and I actually came up with the name, the "Most Innovative New Product Award." You can see it still exists.

SIMARD: Which became really a staple?

BRY: Yeah. Actually, the company Neil and I started won it. It was actually so moving to me that I actually won it. [Laugh]

SIMARD: That's great.

BRY: Yes.

SIMARD: All right. My last question that I want to ask you has nothing to do with CONNECT, but can you name the five most important people you think are at the center of the wireless?

BRY: Oh, wireless. Well, Irwin, obviously.

BRY: Marco Thompson, in terms of what he's done with the Telecom Council. I've not really been involved with the wireless industry. If you're looking at this moment in time, whoever the head of Ericsson is. I would Larry Smarr at UCSD. I don't even know that anybody in venture capital – in San Diego the venture capitalists are funding so little right now. I would have said Bill Stensrud a few years ago.

SIMARD: Right. Well, he's investing in the new Business School at UCSD.

BRY: Yeah. Well, he promised them $100 million years ago, when he was richer than he is today.


BRY: Right. I hope you're seeing Marco, because he's great.

SIMARD: Yes. I've met him once. I'm hoping to meet with him again to talk more about his background.

BRY: He actually had a company that was helped by CONNECT. He had a company called Doctor Design. He was one of the early entrepreneurs who wandered into CONNECT, who got help from CONNECT.

SIMARD: Oh great.

BRY: Funny, when I think of the three most significant people in San Diego who helped our region I think of Irwin Jacobs, Ivor Royston, who's Biotech, and Sol Price. Terrific.

SIMARD: Who?

BRY: Sol Price, Price Club Costco. In terms of what he's doing for the community now.

SIMARD: Right. Right.

Interview conducted by Caroline Simard, PhD, on November 4, 2003
BRY: Now I guess you’d have to say Joan Kroc. But . . .

SIMARD: That’s great. Well, thank you so much for your time.

BRY: You’re welcome.

END INTERVIEW
The San Diego Technology Archive (SDTA), an initiative of the UC San Diego Library, documents the history, formation, and evolution of the companies that formed the San Diego region’s high-tech cluster, beginning in 1965. The SDTA captures the vision, strategic thinking, and recollections of key technology and business founders, entrepreneurs, academics, venture capitalists, early employees, and service providers, many of whom figured prominently in the development of San Diego’s dynamic technology cluster. As these individuals articulate and comment on their contributions, innovations, and entrepreneurial trajectories, a rich living history emerges about the extraordinarily synergistic academic and commercial collaborations that distinguish the San Diego technology community.