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## The Short Life Story of Mike Willegal

### 1950's

I was born on October 12, 1957, in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. I have two older brothers and have one younger sister. The month I was born, was the same month that Sputnik was launched into orbit by the Soviet Union. Because of this timing, I call myself a child of the space age. My first recollection is of a foolish thing that I did. I tried to use a storm window stored in the garage as a slide. Of course, the glass broke and I ended up with quite a few stitches on my right leg. I still carry those scars. They are a useful reminder of how stupid I can be. When I was little, my maternal grandmother, called me Mikey Tikey. Though my grandmother is long gone, once in a while, I still hear this nickname from a close family member.

### 1960's

Though I was born in Fort Atkinson, I grew up in a neighboring town named Whitewater. Whitewater is a small university town in the midst of Wisconsin's dairy country. Whitewater is too small to have a hospital of its own, which is why I was born in Fort, as we called Fort Atkinson. My parents both grew up on dairy farms. By the time I was small, my paternal grandparents, had sold their farm and had moved to a small house in Madison. However, my mom's parents had their farm until about 1970. We visited that farm frequently, especially on holidays. I can remember walking through the barn when I was about 5 years old. I was terrified of the cows, lined up on either side of the barn, as they seemed so big and dangerous to me.

Over much of my life, that fear of the unknown is something that has troubled me. I can remember one day when I was about ten, walking home after dark. Whitewater was a relatively quiet and safe small town. At that age, I was rarely out after dark. The darkness made me nervous and each time a car approached, I would find a nearby tree to hide behind.

In 1964, our family took a car camping vacation. We travelled all the way to Washington, D.C., stopping at the battlefield surrounding Gettysburg, PA. While visiting the battlefield, two things happened. I climbed onto the top of one of the cannons that they had positioned all around the battlefield and promptly fell off. This visit to the battlefield, more significantly, also seeded in me, a lifelong interest in history.

As I learned to read, I established a love of reading and books. I can remember reading books late at night. Since I shared a room with my brother, I read under the covers of my bed with a flashlight. Reading extended to beyond my bedroom. In the third or fourth grade, due to my last name starting with a W, near the end of the alphabet, I sat on one side the of the classroom, at the back. It turns out that my desk was next to the small classroom library. In the middle of class, I would reach over, take a book out and read.

I was a good, but not great student, getting A's and B's in most subjects. During this time, I perfected the art of doing the minimum necessary for such a grade. This unfortunate talent would create some challenges for me in the future.

## 1970's

The 1970s corresponded to teenage and early 20's for me. Like many people, my life evolved and changed greatly during this period. My friends at Whitewater High School gave me a nickname, professor. This no doubt was a reflection of my bookish nature. I was the type of person that now days would be called nerd. Back then, being a nerd wasn't a badge of honor.

When I was about 16, a couple of friends and I discovered the small hobby of wargaming. One of the main centers of wargaming was only about 30 miles away in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. They held an annual convention, which we attended for the first time around 1973. While there, we met the Lake Geneva group's leader, Gary Gygax. He invited us to visit his group and play some games with them. Over the next year, we visited the group in Lake Geneva several times. One the visits involved a visit to Gary's home and an introduction to his new game, Dungeon and Dragons. This game of D&D was run by Gary, himself. At the time, we could never have guessed how that game would explode in popularity.

Around the same time that I was learning about wargaming, my parents split up. I ended up living with my mom, sister and in my mother's parent's house on the farm. They didn't farm anymore, but had kept the farmhouse. We lived there for a year before my mom, her boyfriend, my sister and I, relocated to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. This was a difficult time for everyone. I was still quite afraid of the unknown, and certainly, the culture and people of South Florida were completely unknown to me. I didn't make many new friends in the large high school in Fort Lauderdale, but quickly found a wargaming group was active in the area. This group accepted me as one of their own and made the transition to a new climate and culture much easier for me.

Once or twice a year, some of us would go to a wargaming convention, creating and renewing friendships with Gary Gygax and the rest of the group that was now known as TSR Hobbies. I had created a set of wargaming rules for the American Civil War, and TSR was considering publishing these rules. Eventually, they wrote me, and said that they were going to stop publishing historical game rules and focus their efforts on Dungeons and Dragons. What a wise decision by them. I still have that letter and a number of others from Gary and some of the other founders of TSR hobbies.

By now, I had graduated from high school and had moved on to Broward Community College with a major in mechanical engineering. At the next summer's wargame convention that was held at the Playboy club in Lake Geneva, I saw my first personal computer which was running a game program called Star Trek. I immediately become interested in computers. I'm not a great artist and mechanical engineering at the time involved hand drawing the objects that would be manufactured. This made a change of major, an easy decision. I managed to save enough money to buy one of the first Apple Computers. At one of the next wargame conventions, a couple of my friends at TSR Hobbies asked me about the possibilities of computer gaming. I responded by saying I didn't think it was as good as person to person gaming, because human interaction was an important part of gaming. Playing against a computer just didn't stand up against that. I was really wrong about that. Remember what I said about using a glass window as a slide, sometimes I'm not such a smart person.

#### 1980s

In the 1980's I learned about computer science, established a career as a computer programmer at a local computer company, Systems Engineering Laboratories. I learned mostly by doing, and sometimes failing. I eventually undid my habit of doing the minimum necessary to get a job done. I learned that the only way to be successful as a computer programmer, was to do a complete job as possible and avoid cutting any corners. Through the years, this attitude has carried over to many other aspects of my life. I designed input/output systems and eventually worked my way up to being part of the design team that developed the computers central processing units.

I dropped out of school, just four classes short of having a bachelor's degree in computer science. I also lost interest in the wargaming hobby, replacing it with an interest in racing

catamaran sailboats. I spent about six years racing sailboats, winning a couple of Florida State championships, and achieving a high of fourth place in one of several National Championships that I participated in. I also established some great friendships among those sailors. What a blast we had together.

In the late 80s, some of my better friends left the hobby of racing sailboats to start families. I, too, left the sailing hobby. My interest evolved to bicycling and I took several bicycling tours. The most significant was an 800 mile bicycle journey from Missoula, Montana, to Jasper, Alberta in Canada. That was a spectacular trip that I will never forget. I also raced my bike a few times, though I pretty quickly gave it up as too dangerous a sport for me.

Towards the end of the 1980's, my job evolved into that of a people manager, though because of my fear of the unknown, which I hadn't completely overcome, I think I wasn't that great a manager. Quite frankly, I was terrified of talking to someone I didn't know, though I didn't have any issues with people that I already knew. What a difficult problem for someone that was supposed to be a manager.

#### 1990s and 2000s

One of the software engineers that reported to me had a sister, Cristy, that was single. We met at the Christmas party that I always held in those days. We were married less than a year later. Shortly afterward, I changed jobs, moving to a company making communications equipment, Ungermann-Bass and went back to writing software. Around this time our first son, John was born. The job didn't last long, as the company decided to close the South Florida office about a year after I joined them. However, they offered to move me to another office in Massachusetts. As the tech industry in Florida wasn't doing all that well, we decided to take the opportunity to move. We have lived in Tewksbury, Massachusetts, since then.

I worked for Ungerman-Bass for about five years, but that company was very unstable, and I jumped at the chance to take a job at Cisco Systems, when it presented itself. At the time I changed jobs to Cisco, my younger son, Thomas, was born. I have worked for Cisco since then. Once again, I moved into a management position. However, by this time, I had started to learn to deal with my fears, and over the years eventually became very comfortable in dealing with strangers. I am so proud and happy that my boys seem so much more comfortable in that role than I was, at their age.

On the home front, I spent a number of years co-leading a Cub Scout den and coaching youth baseball. I hope I did a decent job with that work. My boys also played hockey, though because of my limited skating ability, I didn't coach. As with all hockey parents, we spent many early mornings at the rink. Over the years, I must have witnessed well over a thousand youth hockey games and many more practices.

2010

When I became manager, my creative juices were not satisfied and eventually I became interested in vintage computers. One of the rarer ones, an Apple II, which I had purchased early in 1978, I still had. I ended up building reproductions of the rarest early Apple computers, the Apple 1, and the first version of the Apple II, the one I had saved. My interest in the Apple 1, put me in contact with many people associated with the first generation of personal computers. Among them, was Woz, who I exchanged many emails with, and eventually met. The meeting was at a private party held at Paul Allen's Living Computer Museum and Labs in Seattle. It's quite a long story as to how I was invited to that particular event, and I'll leave that to another day. One other person I met and consider my friend, is Daniel Kottke, who was Steve Job's best friend in college.

Also, during this time, I decided to improve my health, and have been working hard, ever since to prioritize my health over almost everything else. I believe in the saying, if you don't have your health, nothing else matters. I have started to learn to ski, ran my first half marathon. I have also returned to one of my favorite outdoor activities; bicycling. I get out on one of my bikes, whenever I can find the time.

In 2016, Cristy's vision started to fail. Eventually she was diagnosed as having a pituitary gland tumor. The surgeons who attempted to remove the tumor cut her carotid artery, which almost killed her. The stroke that accompanied this failed surgery, has significantly impacted Cristy's mobility and changed our lives. She was in the hospital for three months, before coming home. She is now able to take care of herself, but it's been challenging for the entire family. During the time Cristy was in the hospital, I asked my boss to allow me to go back to writing software. I was allowed to drop out the ranks of Cisco managers. I have no intention to ever return to a management role. I have also returned to school, but this time taking English classes. This time, I hope I can stick it out and complete the requirements for a bachelor's degree.

I hope this synopsis of my life reveals something of my character and background to the reader.