# PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

## FIVE QUESTIONS

### Valerie Sutton

*Valerie Sutton of La Jolla, a former professional ballet dancer, built on her early work developing a notation system for recording body movements to create SignWriting (http://www.signwriting.org), an "alphabet" of symbols that can be used to write American Sign Language, and SignBank (http://www.signbank.org), a database of the symbols. The nonprofit Center for Sutton Movement Writing provides free educational materials through the SignWriting Literacy Project.*

**What was the inspiration for SignWriting?**

Until SignWriting, sign languages were not written languages. Sign language is real language, different from English and with its own grammar. It uses your whole body, almost like mime. When I was a professional ballet dancer, I invented a way to read and write all body movements. That led to Sutton DanceWriting, which led to the beginning of SignWriting in 1974. Many people don't know that sign language is not international. There are hundreds of sign languages. Because it writes body movements, SignWriting can be used to write any sign language in the world.

**How widespread is the use of SignWriting?**

SignWriting is used in 27 countries, primarily by the educated deaf, teachers of the deaf and researchers. Since it is relatively new, deaf adults didn't have it in their school systems. The first pilot program is in a school for the deaf in Albuquerque, N.M. The program is free for any school that is using sign language.

**How did FileMaker get involved?**

We have two programs, one called SignBank, a database of the SignWriting symbols. Sign-Bank was originally designed for the Macintosh in 1988 in a little program called Desk Accessories. When the Mac changed, SignBank was



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out of date. Dr. Penny Boyes Braem of Zurich, Switzerland, used FileMaker Pro for her sign-language database of mostly video. She wanted to use SignBank, so she asked if we could convert it to FileMaker. We found a wonderful programmer, Todd Duell of Formulations Pro, a FileMaker database company in Del Mar, to take our old database and make it work in FileMaker Pro.

**What technology do you personally rely on?**

I have four Macs. I use Windows programs, but on the Mac. I am also the Web designer for all my sites, from MovementWriting.org to SymbolBank.org to SignWriting.org. I use Dreamweaver, Macromedia, Photoshop, Adobe Acrobat.

**When you were a dancer, did you ever think you'd be so involved in technology?**

I started professional dance training at age 10. At age 15, I started writing down the dances I was learning. I published my first textbook on dance writing when I was 23 or 24. But I would never have foreseen the influence of the computer. I spent a whole 10 years writing it by hand.

– LAUREL SCOTT

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San Diego Union Tribune

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**January 31, 2005**

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