# NCWIT Interview with Kim Polese

***BIO:*** *Kim Polese is the CEO of SpikeSource, Inc., a software company based in Silicon Valley. The company is backed by venture firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers and has developed an advanced automated testing technology for certifying interoperability of open source software, creating a continual "UL"-style certification for Global 2000 companies that depend on open source software applications to run their core business operations. The automation enables the delivery of low-cost, high-quality software to a mass market, resulting in more affordable and dependable software applications for business of all sizes worldwide. Prior to joining SpikeSource in August 2004, Kim co-founded Marimba, Inc., a leading provider of systems management solutions, in 1996. Marimba was acquired by BMC Software in June 2004. Kim served as President, Chief Executive Officer, and Chairman of Marimba, leading the company through a successful public offering and to profitability in 2000. Before co-founding Marimba, Kim worked in software management at Sun Microsystems and was the original product manager for Java, leading its launch in 1995. Prior to joining Sun, Kim was with IntelliCorp Inc., consulting for Fortune 500 companies in the development of expert systems.*

*Kim earned a Bachelor's degree in Biophysics from the University of California, Berkeley and studied Computer Science at the University of Washington in Seattle. Kim serves on several boards, including the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, the University of California President's Board on Science and Innovation, UC Berkeley's College of Engineering, the Carnegie Mellon School of Computer Science, and the Global Security Institute.*

**Lucy Sanders**: Hi, this is Lucy Sanders. I'm the CEO of the National Center for Women in Information Technology. This interview is one in a series of interviews that we're doing with fabulous IT entrepreneurs. With me today are Larry Nelson and Lee Kennedy. Larry is CEO of w3w3.com, and Lee is an insulate director. Welcome, Larry and Lee.

**Larry Nelson**: Well, thank you. That's so great being able to get together and help support this type of thing. The Heroes program is sponsored by NCWIT, wonderful. At w3w3.com we archive everything and we push it out. We have a large audience, and we're happy to be part of this.

**Lee Kennedy**: Thanks, Lucy. I'm excited to be here and be part of the interview series.

**Lucy**: Today we're interviewing Kim Polese. We're so excited, Kim, to have you on the call.

**Kim Polese**: Thank you, delighted to be here.

**Lucy**: I have to say that your career has been one that I think is just awesome. When I look back at some of the things you've been involved with for example Java. I remember when Sun released Java. Us techies at Bell Labs were pretty excited about that, because it really enabled the Internet to come alive. You could bring applications along with the static web pages. That was just tremendously thrilling.

Then, when you moved over into Marimba, worked on push technology, again, we were all rather thrilled that we could have stuff come to our desktop without even asking for it.

That's pretty amazing. And now you have a new company Spikesource is a couple of years old, is that right?

**Kim**: Yes. Actually, it was founded in 2003 and I joined. It was an incubation project at Kline & Perkins, a venture firm here in Silicon Valley. I joined in the fall of 2004.

**Lucy**: I just think you've been on the leading edge of all of these different trends in software and software development. Why don't you give the listeners a little bit of information about Spikesource?

**Kim**: Sure. I'd be happy to. So, Spikesource, basically its mission is in a nutshell to democratize software, and do that by bringing open source software to a mass market. When I say "democratize software", I mean make software as low-cost and as easy to maintain, to use as possible.

Software's a wonderful thing; it powers all sorts of service and appliances, the world around use every day. But it's also really complicated both to develop, package, maintain and support. Open source has provided a wonderful new abundance, a new ecosystem of software applications, components and infrastructure.

It is really totally changing the software industry in a variety of ways, and really accelerating innovation. Software is getting better faster. There are many more people who are banging on it and making it better every day. That's a wonderful thing. It's an exciting time to be in the software world.

But there's also a challenge with abundance. Businesses that have been using open source find very quickly that they get into a lot of overhead time and cost in maintaining open source application. The applications typically consist of dozens or hundreds of different open source components, all of which need to be updated, maintained and made to work together, continually integrated and tested. That's a huge problem.

So, what Spikesource is doing is really helping that problem through automation. We're automating specifically the process of maintaining that software and ensuring that the software applications continue to work, stay up and running and are free of viruses, and so forth. It's really making the process of maintaining open source software invisible to the user.

We're using very interesting approaches in computer science and automating the build test patch process, and creating an automatic test framework for basically packaging up, distributing, supporting and maintaining these open source applications. We're bringing to market a variety of open source applications. Basically taking many of the best applications out there on the Internet, email, content management, business intelligence, CRM and so forth, and offering those as packaged applications to business of all sizes. There's a low-cost subscription maintenance stream along with it.

So, in this way when I said "democratizing software", again, it's really about making software much easier to buy, to use, and to have supported at a much lower cost. That's now all possible because of open source and because of the new technologies that we're working on and others are participating in as well in innovating, automating and maintaining the software.

**Lucy**: I think that the technologies involved with software engineering are some of the most complex. No question. And so, I can only imagine that the technologies that you're using at Spikesource are pretty advanced.

**Kim**: Yes.

**Lucy**: For sure. And that gets me to the first question that we wanted to ask you. In addition to some of the technologies that you're using today at Spikesource, what other technologies do you see on the horizon that you find particularly cool?

**Kim**: Well, the open source world is really where most of the most interesting innovation is happening, in my view, in software today. That's because of the power of collaboration.

You take, for example, virtualization. Virtualization, or virtualization software, there's a huge amount of innovation happening there. You see a lot of not only developers all over the world who are contributing to open source virtualization technologies, but also big companies that are standardizing on open source and using it to drive greater value in their hardware platforms.

So, to me in general the most exciting place to be in software today is in the open source world. In virtually every category there's tremendous innovation happening and really a new generation of software

is being developed.

And there are a lot of very important supporting technologies and underlying infrastructure that's also helping make this happen. A lot of the service-oriented architecture, the web services, the easy to use now APIs that make it possible to put pieces of software together more easily, and new techniques like Agile programming and so forth to make it easier to build software faster...

But so much of that, again, really does come out of the open source world. We're finding that the open source model of building software is becoming more prevalent even within companies and across companies in vertical industries such as financial services and retail. Companies are now beginning to collaborate on creating applications that they can share to make their respective businesses more efficient.

**Lucy**: In fact, I'm on a commission looking at the R&D ecosystem for IT. We were at Harvard and we listened to a researcher not too long ago who was studying open source and the movement of companies into open source. It was pretty interesting how that platform is really emerging.

How did you first get into technology, Kim?

**Kim**: I was actually a girl geek. I grew up in Berkeley, California and I was fortunate to really be exposed to science at a very early age. I started entering science fairs as a kid in elementary school and just found that I loved the idea of creating something new and exploring, and testing the limits of what was possible.

Then, I found a place called the Lords Hall of Science, which is a public science museum here in the Bay Area. I went up there, again, as a kid in elementary school and started playing on the computers. There was a program called Eliza which was an early artificial intelligence software application that was running on the computers there.

It was kind of like an online psychotherapist, and I really loved playing on the computer that ran Eliza and trying to get Eliza to go into a loop or act like a computer, again, see the limits of what was possible. So, all of that sparked my curiosity, my interest in not only science but specifically computers and software.

I ultimately ended up getting a degree in biophysics, but at Berkeley I started to get more and more into computer programming and software development as an undergrad. That increasingly became where my interests were directed.

**Lucy**: That's really cool. Jim, tell us why you're an entrepreneur and what it is about entrepreneurship that really makes you tick.

**Jim**: Well, I've always loved creating new things. I love inventing and coming up with a new idea, running with it and seeing what's possible. There's nothing more exciting than setting out with a whole team of people on a mission, climb a mountain and actually doing it together, making it happen.

So, I think it's the creativity. It's the element of being able to chart your own course, come up with your own idea. It's the challenge of making that idea actually into a successful business, which is two very distinct elements to building a successful company in the technology area. One is coming up with a great technology, but the other is actually making it work in the economic sense and the sense of the market acceptance. That turned out to be a whole separate creative process.

All of that is very challenging. I love a challenge. I love climbing mountains and scaling new heights, because it's just fun when you get there and it's fun along the way. So, I found that that was just something I gravitated towards. I think it's just something that's been inside me forever.

**Lucy**: And it's a pretty good view when you get to the top.

**Larry**: I'll say. Kim, I can't help but reflect back. Quite some time ago, did I hear that you were one of those early radicals that were pushing free and open source software?

**Kim**: Well, I did grow up in Berkeley, it's true. And I was hanging out at Cal when Bill Joy was a grad student. So, I do have it probably in my DNA by now. But I didn't actually get to immerse myself in open source until I joined Spikesource in 2004 and really started doing it as full-time and really wrapping my head around the whole open source world and building a business.

**Larry**: You've done a wonderful job. Now, you mentioned Bill Joy. We interview him probably five, six, seven years ago. Along the line, did you have any particular mentor, or support person or support group that really helped along the way?

**Kim**: Well, I was very fortunate to work at a great company for seven years, Sun Microsystems. Sun was full of very bright I'd say demanding, people where there was a bar that was set high and you had to achieve more than you thought you were capable of. I look at the management team, the founders of Sun, Scott, Scott McNealy, Bill Joy, Vinod Khosla and Andy Bechtolsheim. They really were a great inspiration to me, each of them.

Also, to me, at that time in the '80s as I was developing my career, Carol Vartz, who was a senior executive at Sun at the time, I really looked up to her. Sandy Kurtzig, Heidi Roizen, these were women who were really leading the way in building companies and proving that women could achieve great things in technology and software.

So, I was surrounded I guess by many inspirational leaders, and I learned what I could from each of them and then really molded that into what I decided to do next, how I developed my career.

**Lucy**: Kim, you've been in the thick of Silicon Valley and all the changes that have taken place over the last 10, 20 years, and you've had such an exciting career. When you look back, what's the toughest thing that you've had to do in your career?

**Kim**: Well, there are many challenges in building a company. I'd say probably the toughest thing as a manager is letting someone go. It's actually making a decision that you know is right for the company and right for ultimately that individual, but always a tough thing to do. I'd say that's probably the top of the list, and that's just one of those management challenges that everyone has to deal with at a certain point.

So, that's on the not so fun part. There are also challenges just inherently in building a business. I'd say the other thing that I have faced repeatedly, but actually is kind of a fun challenge, is the need to adapt to change. When you're starting a company and you're in a new market, you've got a new idea, it's unproven, there's precedent, you can't become attached to that one plan that you're going to execute on it. There's always going to be a reason why it doesn't exactly turn out that way, another twist in the path, another unexpected obstacle, but then unexpected opportunity at the same time.

And so, adapting to change and being comfortable with change on a daily basis is something that can real tough at first, but once you get used to it, it's actually exhilarating. You love the challenge of being able to rise to the occasion and adjust course, change course as needed, and still keep your eye on the ultimate goal that you're headed towards.

It's just that the path along the way is different from what you thought it would be. I'd say that's a more fun, tough thing that I've faced in business.

**Lucy**: Well, and in face you ultimately get to the place where you really enjoy change. You wouldn't want to be working in something where that wasn't part of what you did every day. It really becomes part of the challenge.

I think that's wonderful advice. You can share with us, a bit more advice that you might give to young people about entrepreneurship if they were sitting in the room with you right now.

**Kim**: Sure. Well, there is a lot to say. If I were to boil it down to some of the things that come to mind first, it really has to do what I was just talking about. You might have a great idea, but you can't forget the market that you are launching it into, and all of the other constituents that need to contribute to the success of what you are setting out to do.

For example, you may be launching a product in the market; the most brilliant product that anyone has developed or thought of but it turns out that it's just too early. A good example of this is I worked in artificial intelligence, AI, software back in the 80's. We built a fantastic software system that was an expert system, but the hardware requirements were prohibitive in terms of cost and just the overall expense of delivering an expert system.

You had $50000.00+ computers required, and ultimately there wasn't a mass market for that back in the 80's. The software wasn't ready for the environment around it that it needed to rely on, so for entrepreneurs I'd say don't get too enamored of your idea. Make sure that you see the full picture and that you find a way to make it palatable in the market today and then chart a path to where you ultimately believe you can go and what the ultimate end goal is. But, don't be too wrapped up with getting to the end goal right off the bat. So, that's one thing.

The other thing I'd say is get comfortable with saying "no" because as an entrepreneur you want to say "yes" to every possibility and every potential customer and partner that comes along. There is a temptation to do that, especially early on. You have to have the discipline to say, "You know what? We'd love to deliver this product into both the enterprise market and the consumer market, and we know the software is capable of working for both markets, but we're just going to focus on the enterprise market". That's the first step. From there we can build a bigger company and ultimately get to the broader market.

Saying "no", we had to do this at Marimba, a decision we made very early on to focus on the enterprise and not the consumer market. It turned out to be the best decision we made, but it was a very tough one at the time because I knew we could do anything. We could absolutely serve a broader market, but you have to have the discipline to know what you are capable of and take one step at a time.

**Lucy**: That's some very sage advice. What personal characteristics do you think have given you advantages as an entrepreneur?

**Kim**: Probably the greatest one is persistence. It's never losing sight of that goal that you are charging toward and never losing faith that you will achieve that goal and being totally flexible and able to deal with any obstacle that comes along. Whether it's an obstacle in the market, a challenge with the team, whatever it happens to be, never giving up, never ever, ever, ever giving up. If you have that, you'll find a way to get to where you are going no matter what. I think that's probably for every successful entrepreneur you will find that that is the primary characteristic that made them.

**Lucy**: In fact, we're finding that with this series of interviews. I believe that one of the people we interviewed a few weeks ago said there is this line between persistence and pesky. And it's OK to cross over it from time to time.

**Kim**: Yeah, that's probably true.

**Lucy**: I want to switch a minute into this issue of balance. I know there is a lot written about work and personal balance, and so we just wanted to ask, how do you bring balance into your life?

**Kim**: Well, that's a great question. One thing I've always made sure to do is to continue to pursue the things I love to do in the rest of my life. One thing I love is dance. I've always done that, and I still do ballet and jazz. I've done it since I was a kid and will never stop. I find that it's tremendous; it's literally all balance. It's a great counterpoint, too, to do what I do all day long. It's also requires great focus and attention, and you just can't sort of space out while you're learning a piece of choreography. So, that's one thing I love.

I love also mountain biking and getting out and just charging up a mountain. So, those are the things I have always done and will continue to do. I find also that the mind-body balance is really important. If you are physically fit your mind is much sharper and you are able to run a marathon in business as well as physically. So, that's one way.

The other is just time for family and friends. I always make time for family and friends. It's not enough ever, but you have to stand back every so often and think about what's really important in life. Those connections and relationships are really more important than anything, so I try and not always succeed as well as I'd like. But, I try as much as possible to keep that at the forefront, too.

**Larry Nelson**: Kim, I want to thank you for what you've shared so far. It's easy to see by the discussion here why you were chosen as one of the heroes, that's for sure. Now, you have already achieved a great deal, and I know you are going to take Spike Source to another level. In addition to Spike Source, what is your next thing? What are you going to do next?

**Kim**: Well, one thing I've always done is actually not plan too far in advance.

**Lucy**: That's a good idea.

**Kim**: The reason is sort of tongue-in-cheek, but I find that serendipity is a wonderful thing. I am in the most dynamic, exciting industry and, I think, place for the area and the world. I am surrounded by brilliant, creative people, and that network is ever expanding so I know that whatever I do next it will evolve from creating something new together with a team of people and doing our best to make an impact in some positive way in the world.

I personally would like to find a way to make an impact in the world that goes beyond my industry. I haven't quite figured out when and how and what that will be, but that's something that I'd like to do in my life. I'm sure that the path will appear as it always has. As long as I follow my passion and surround myself with people that I love working with and respect and appreciate, I know that life will unfold in wonderful ways. I have faith.

**Lucy**: I think that's just really well said. I'm just sitting here thinking you are just one of the top web entrepreneurs of our age. It's wonderful. We are so thrilled to have talked to you.

**Kim**: Thank you. I am more than honored to be part of this series. Thank you.

**Larry**: A couple of words that stick out in my mind, too, in addition to hear all this democratized, open source and serendipity.

**Lucy**: That's great. And see I'm a techie so what stands out for me, open source, Java. So, Kim, thank you, thank you very much.

**Kim**: Thank you.

**Lucy**: We appreciate your joining us. I want to remind listeners where these podcasts can be found at www.ncwit.org and also at w3w3.com. Please do pass these along to friends who might want to listen. Kim, thanks again.

**Kim**: Thank you, my pleasure.