

Tech Solidarity: Lech Walesa Wants to Use High Tech To Improve World

By Bea Quirk, Special To LTW

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CHARLOTTE – Lech Walesa may have founded the Solidarity movement in Poland and toppled communism, served as its first democratically elected president, and won the Nobel Peace Prize, but he remains, at heart, a tradesman, an electrician and a tinkerer.

“It’s a feature of my generation to want to understand exactly how something works – to understand the input, the process it goes through inside and then the output,” Walesa said in an interview conducted through an interpreter in Charlotte Thursday. “With these new developments, everything is covered up. I’ve tried dismantling some of them, but you still can’t see how they work.”

Walesa still has what can only be described as ‘presence,’ and it’s not hard to imagine the combination of strength, courage and charisma that enabled him to successfully stare down the Polish communist regime in the 1980s. His hair and moustache are white now, but he exudes high energy, and he gestures and moves about when he speaks, which is often accompanied by laughter and big smiles. At the start of the interview, he put on a baseball cap with the NuTech logo on it, and then turned it around backwards like some member of Generation X.

But Walesa is serious about making up for the 20 years his involvement with technology was “interrupted by politics.”

“I insist on understanding how things work,” Walesa said. “If you don’t understand the basics of something’s functioning, then you can’t really understand its implications. That causes me some concern and anxiety.”

Walesa shrugged his shoulders and admitted his children don’t share that attitude. “They just pick up a device and expect it to work,” he adds. “Perhaps that’s the better approach.”

Technology as a tool for progress

But don’t get the impression Walesa is a technophobe. Quite the contrary. He sat with a Palm Pilot in front of him during Thursday’s interview, uses a PC and laptop regularly, participates in Internet chat rooms and even has his own web site. And he believes technology can help make a better world.

It’s that belief that motivated him to say yes to an offer to serve on the board of directors of Charlotte-based NuTech Solutions, Inc. That’s why he’s in Charlotte this weekend – to attend a board meeting and also to receive an honorary doctor of laws degree from UNC Charlotte.

“The process of globalization and continentalization requires a well-planned approach, and without a systematic approach to progress, things won’t work,” Walesa explained. “And human beings are, by nature, ambitious, so it’s difficult to reach a consensus on many things. To reach a consensus and make the proper decisions, we need software and programs to help us, something that verifies and draws conclusions from what we observe.

“We need a connecting approach between the economists and the unionists, for the best economic plans can be jeopardized by the unionists,” Walesa continued. “There’s no proper software to deal with it yet, and companies need to be working on it. Technology couldn’t do it before, but I am convinced that it can be done, that it is possible. I don’t believe anything to be impossible.”

NuTech's software fits the bill

Although not yet put to these exact kinds of uses, NuTech's sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) technology (such as so-called fuzzy systems, genetic algorithms and neural networks) takes that approach, going far beyond basic data mining, or pattern recognition, to predicting outcomes and making recommendations for future actions. The simulation software creates an artificial environment and then evaluates how the model changes over time and is affected by changes in conditions.

For example, Ford Motor Co. uses it to optimize the distribution of off-lease vehicles, while the US Department of Defense uses it to evaluate military threats. Most of its clients are Fortune 500 companies.

NuTech – which has attracted \$12 million from individual investors and is now at the break-even point -- was founded in 1999 by two Polish immigrants, Zbigniew Michalewicz and his son Matthew. Both have strong ties to UNC Charlotte. The elder, who is the firm's Chief Science Officer, was chair of the Computer Science Department there for 14 years, while Matthew, the firm's CEO, graduated with a business degree from the university and was recently named outstanding alumnus of the year.

Walesa served as president of Poland from 1990-1995 and is now the patron of the Lech Walesa Institute, a foundation dedicated to advancing the ideals of democracy and free market reform throughout Eastern Europe. The NuTech founders had no previous connection with Walesa, but the head of their Polish office communicated regularly with the director of the foundation, who was able to set up a meeting last spring between the NuTech founders and the former president.

Regarding his decision to join NuTech, Walesa told Forbes Magazine, "I've been offered many and many positions at companies over the years, but I've turned them all down. Why? Because my ambitions are reserved for truly meaningful opportunities. NuTech Solutions is doing important things."

UNC Charlotte Chancellor James Woodward meets regularly with the two Michalewicz's, and when they announced in May that Walesa was joining the board, the idea of presenting him with an honorary degree from the university seemed a natural. "I'm not even sure now whose idea it was," Matthew says.

Despite all the accolades, Walesa remains down-to-earth and full of good humor – and always the union man. "I think we need to form a union for former presidents," he said with a grin. "There's no one out there to protect us."

NuTech Web site:

www.nutechsolutions.com

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