#### WWW.STC-BERKELEY.ORG

# Ragged Left

#### THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION



May 2002 Vol. 16, No. 5

BERKELEY CHAPTER



## Touchstone On Tour: Annual Competition Visits Berkeley STC

A tour meeting this month we focus on one of the most important activities of the Northern California chapters of STC: our annual technical communication competition, called Touchstone. Each year hundreds of technical communicators submit their best work, and nearly a hundred volunteers evaluate that work.

Bay Area technical communicators respect and covet the Touchstone awards, but even more valuable to most entrants are the detailed written comments they receive from the volunteers who evaluate their entries.

Conducting this competition is a substantial enterprise. Our speakers this month are at the center of that enterprise. They will give you an insider's view of how it works. You will also be able to view a selection of this year's winning entries and discuss with our speakers what makes these entries special.

#### The Speakers

Patrick Lufkin is a technical communicator specializing in software documentation. He holds an M.A. in English from San Francisco State University, where he also studied technical communication and computer science. Patrick served four terms as president of the San Francisco STC chapter and has edited its newsletter. He won awards in Touchstone competitions twice, and this year he served as a member of the Touchstone coordinating committee, helped train judges, monitored quality control, and handled publicity. In the mid-1990s, he co-authored several Northern California technical communication salary surveys with economist David Bradwell, earning an STC chapter leadership award. Patrick has long been a regular at Berkeley chapter meetings.

Richard Mateosian has over thirty-five years of experience in technical communication. He is a writer at Documentum, Inc., and the review editor of IEEE Micro. He has a Ph.D. in mathematics from UC Berkeley.

Richard is a member of the Berkeley chapter. He is a senior member of STC and a winner of the award for distinguished chapter service. He was president of the Berkeley chapter for two years (1995-97). He has judged in local and international competitions since 1995. He directed the Touchstone 1996 competition and has worked to enhance the judging process. Since 2000 he has led the judging quality assurance team. He also serves on the Touchstone competition advisory committee and is treasurer of the STC Ken Gordon Scholarship.

Join us for this informative presentation on Wednesday, May 8th. Meeting reservation details can be found on page 2.

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# Ragged Left

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# **About the STC**

TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION is the bridge between those who create ideas and those who use them. Conveying scientific and technical information clearly, precisely, and accurately is an essential occupation in all sectors of business and government.



STC has more than 20,000 members and 155 chapters worldwide. Its members include writers, editors, artists, illustrators, photographers, audiovisual specialists,

managers, supervisors, educators, students, employees, and consultants. STC strives to:

- Advance the theory and practice of technical communication.
- Promote awareness of trends and technology in technical communication.
- Aid the educational and professional development of its members.

#### Membership

Membership is open to everyone. Regular membership is \$110/year, with an additional \$15 enrollment fee the first year. Student membership is \$45/year.

To receive additional information and an application form, via mail or email:

- Send email to *bkymbrs@stc.org*.
- Send mail to STC-Berkeley, PO Box 1007, Berkeley CA 94701-1007.

#### Submissions

*Ragged Left* publishes original articles and illustrations. We edit them to meet our needs. You retain copyright but grant every STC publication royalty-free permission to reproduce the article or illustration in print or any other medium. Please contact the editor for details of how to submit articles and illustrations.

Deadline for unsolicited submissions is the 20th of the month preceding publication. Other STC publications are hereby granted permission to reprint articles from *Ragged Left*, provided such reprints credit the author and a copy of any publication containing such a reprint is sent to the *Ragged Left* editor.

#### STC-Berkeley Chapter Meeting Details

**Next meeting:** Wednesday, May 8. Vo's Restaurant in downtown Oakland, is within easy walking distance to BART, is wheelchair accessible, and has both street and nearby garage parking.

Networking and conversation start at 6:00 P.M., and dinner at 6:30 P.M. If you want to eat dinner, reservations are required and *must* be received no later than 12:00 NOON the Monday before the meeting (May 6). Reservations are necessary so that we can order the right amount of food. Do *not* contact the restaurant.

Send checks to Berkeley STC, P.O. Box 1007, Berkeley, 94701.



**RSVP online:** Use your credit card to order meeting reservations via the chapter Web site, *www.stc-berkeley.org.* The meeting fee with dinner is \$18 for members, \$15 for student members, and \$21 for nonmembers. If you come for the program only, starting at 7:30 P.M., the fee is \$12 for members and non-members, and \$10 for students. If you are not eating, payments may be made at the door.

#### **Résumé or Portfolio Review**

Does your résumé or portfolio present your qualifications in the best light? If you're new to the field, or just concerned that your résumé or portfolio may not be up to snuff, sign up for a free 30-minute review. We have a cadre of seasoned tech writers with hiring experience who can review your material and give you expert feedback.

To sign up for a review, email *employment@stc-berkeley.org* by the Thursday before the monthly meeting.

State your name and the meeting at which you're hoping to have the review. Be sure to write *resume review* or *portfolio review* in the subject heading of the email message. If it's for a résumé, paste your résumé into the body of the message. If it's a portfolio review, bring your portfolio to the appointment.

After you've sent the email, look for a reply from the Employment Manager, confirming that you are booked for a review. The message will also specify your review time (6 or 6:30) and who your reviewer will be. Reviews are booked on a first-come, first-served basis. Since our reviewers are volunteers, the number of slots available varies for each meeting.

# **President's Column**

#### By Kathryn Munn, Chapter President

Greetings, Berkeley chapter members and friends! The lineup of presentations for the next two months is well worth your consideration. On May 8 you will not want to miss a presentation about Touchstone, the annual Northern California Technical Communication Competition. Richard Mateosian, the chapter's 2002 Distinguished Chapter Service Award recipient and Touchstone Advisory Committee member, will host a panel of the leaders of this prestigious competition. You will also be able to view the traveling show of the winning entries for the 2001 competition. On June 12 Bonni Graham, our Region 8 Director/Sponsor, will join us for an entertaining and informative presentation entitled *Psst, Wanna Buy Some Doc?* STC Berkeley meetings are always held on the 2<sup>nd</sup>

Wednesday of the month.

The Executive Committee continues to welcome comment from the membership on the issue of changing the name of the chapter. From the home page *of www.stc-berkeley.org* click the *What's in a Name?* link for an explanation of the issue and instructions on joining the discussion list.

As always we want to hear about what the Chapter can do to support you in your professional goals as a technical communicator. Email *president@stc-berkeley.org* with your ideas, suggestions, and especially any ways you might be willing to contribute your own talent and time. See you soon at one of our meetings. See you at our May 8 meeting.

## User Documentation vs. Training Materials

#### A Recap of the April Meeting:

By Joe Devney

How is writing training documentation different from writing user guides or other software manuals? A useful metaphor, says Linda Stoneall, is the difference between the roles of an encyclopedia author and a playwright.

Stoneall, an instructional designer and trainer, spoke at the April meeting of the Berkeley STC chapter. She began her presentation with a demonstration of the kind of software training that many people have suffered through: a quick run-through of all the onscreen buttons and commands for a computer program—with little context, and no time to absorb the implications of the information she was imparting. Fortunately, that was Stoneall's example of how *not* to train. A training class does not need to be as "encyclopedic" as a printed reference. The author needs to keep the audience's interest, and limit the amount of information presented at once. Stoneall's rule of thumb is that a training presentation should impart seven to eleven important points. She pointed out several other differences between the "encyclopedia" and "playwright" approaches to writing. The user documentation uses imperative sentences to give commands and step-by-step instructions; training documentation is more sparse, with notes for the trainer, and bullet points and fill-in-the-blank questions for the student. There is little creativity in writing printed documentation, with its straightforward style and strict consistency in vocabulary; training needs to be memorable, so it can include colorful figures of speech, variety in language, and even games. A fact in a user manual is normally only stated once; important points in a training class should be repeated in various ways so they are remembered by the students.

Another important difference between the two types of writing is that the deliverables, the vehicles to impart the information to the audience, are different. Technical writing produces user manuals that may include indexes and tables of contents, glossaries, troubleshooting guides, and perhaps a complete flowchart of the way the software works. Other deliverables include troubleshooting guides and help screens.

A training presentation, on the other hand, may include a slide show, student handouts, scenarios and exercises with realistic examples, tests and quizzes, video scripts, leader's guides, and even class evaluation forms.

Stoneall's audience at the meeting added lively discussion of the topic. One especially important point came up: the distinction between the encyclopedia author and the playwright is somewhat artificial. Stoneall acknowledged that while the metaphors are useful as teaching tools, in actuality there is a lot of overlap between the two types of writing. They have a shared goal—explaining software functions to people who need to know it—even if the specific methods differ somewhat.

Stoneall works independently, and can be reached at *lindastoneall@hotmail.com*.

## **New Senior Members**

We are pleased to announce that four Berkeley Chapter members have achieved the status of Senior Member. According to the STC Bylaws, the grade of senior member is conferred upon those who have held the grade of member of STC for five years. Congratulations to the following new senior members:

Kristen M. Kelleher Daniel S. Rouse David B. Solnit Richard G. Weiss

## Writing API Documentation: A Class Report

BY SUSAN BECKER

We've all seen the job listings for API technical writers. They promise high salaries, ideal working conditions, and full benefits, including the admiration and respect of our colleagues.

To find out if we too could do this, a dozen of us took the Documenting APIs class offered by the Berkeley STC in January.

The class promo promised that "anyone with solid technical communications experience should feel comfortable producing API documentation after taking this class."

Most of us were just hoping to feel comfortable taking the class. We found out that many of us had already documented some APIs and that all of us could try our hand at it during the class.

Our instructor was David Alt, the chapter Internet Manager and the saxophone player at the Berkeley STC holiday party, an obviously multi-talented and entertaining guy, who provided the workshop pro-bono.

Over the three full Saturdays that we met, David discussed some key programming concepts and the basics of API documentation. He provided us with examples of an API and API documentation that he had garnered from the Internet. And through a series of exercises, we produced our own API docs.

## **Programming Concepts**

#### APIs

According to David, an API (application program interface) is, "language that allows programmers to write code in which various systems interact to do something useful."

The applications are operating systems, programs, web servers, databases, and so on. The interface is the space where the applications interact. Programming is writing the code to create that interaction. I found it helpful to compare APIs to GUIs. With a GUI (graphical user interface), the user gets a program

to do something, like print a document. With an API, an application program gets another program to do something, like print a document, without user intervention.

As an example of an API, David showed us one that is available from the Web site for Metbroker, a freeware Java program for accessing weather databases. David then also had an opportunity to explain Metbroker's servlet architecture, which you may be happy to note I won't go into here.

#### **Procedural Computer Languages**

David discussed the differences between programming with procedural and object-oriented languages. With procedural languages (e.g., COBOL), one command follows another, starting with an action, with this pattern: verb (noun, noun,...). For example, move (oldfile, newfile). The actions are general purpose; they can be applied to any noun. The command line interface (like the DOS prompt) is the basis of procedural programming. As an example, for our homework, we downloaded and installed Cygwin, a shareware UNIX shell for Windows. We then attempted to use it to download, untar, and unzip files for our first assignment. Some of us were more successful than others. (And some resorted to their old Windows tools, but don't tell David.)

#### **Object-oriented Languages**

In object-oriented (OO) languages (e.g., JAVA and C++), the noun (or object) knows how to act. The commands follow this pattern: noun.verb (noun,...). For example, oldfile.move (newfile). The action is associated with the object.

Inheritance is one of the four basic concepts of object-oriented programming. Any functionality of a parent object becomes available to a child object (an object based on the parent) without any more work from the programmer.

As an example of OO programming, for another homework assignment, we downloaded and installed the Java SDK. Then in class, we wrote our first Java code, the classic "Hello World." (As you may guess, programming has the thrill of a forbidden treat for tech writers.)

#### Tip!

David advised us to learn the format of comments and the meaning of the white space for any language we work with.

#### **Documenting APIs**

Documenting an API is telling developers what they need to know about the application and the interface so that they can write the code to create the interactions between that application and their application.

#### What developers need to know

David said that developers use APIs when they develop an application to solve a business problem. They design the solution for the problem in a specific environment, write it, and debug it.

The developer usually already knows the language of the applications involved, the system, and something about the domain. What they don't know is your application or its API.

They need to know how the application can solve their problem, what the environment is (e.g., client server), what parts of the application to use as they design a solution, the implications or results of that solution, and how to debug and avoid problems. Of course the nitty-gritty includes the initialization, declarations, classes, methods, properties, and so on, depending on the language involved. (You didn't think you'd get all the answers without taking the class, did you?)

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## **It's That Time Again: Elections**

It's spring and that's chapter elections time. Those we elect set the direction our chapter takes for the coming year -- how we spend our money, where we meet, and what we learn at our meetings.

The elective positions are:

**President:** Leads chapter meetings and board meetings, represents the chapter to the rest of STC, inspires others to become active in the chapter, and makes many day-to-day decisions about chapter operations.

**Vice-President for Programs:** Finds speakers and other programs for chapter meetings, makes arrangements for required audio/visual equipment, oversees PR for meetings, welcomes and introduces speakers.

**Vice-President for Membership:** Conducts correspondence with people seeking information about STC. Helps potential members become members. Serves as a go-between for members who need to deal with STC headquarters. Greets potential members at chapter meetings. Encourages members to renew. Helps everyone feel like a valuable part of the chapter.

**Secretary:** Creates and distributes minutes of board meetings. May also answer chapter voice mail, correspond with other STC groups, and help with board activities as needed.

**Treasurer:** Receives chapter income and pays bills. Keeps accurate financial records. Reports to the membership about the financial health of the chapter. Advises the board about proposed chapter expenditures.

Any Berkeley STC member in good standing can run for any office. The deadline for declaring is the May chapter meeting—Wednesday, May 8th. To date, the following candidates have come forward:

- Kathryn Munn, President
- Paul Sinasohn, Vice-President for Programs
- Ruth Wright, Vice-President for Membership
- Susan Marchionna, Treasurer
- David McCoard, Secretary

If you wish to become a candidate, please contact any of the current chapter officers or the elections committee chair, Richard Mateosian *xrm@pacbell.net*. The final ballot, candidates' statements, and instructions for voting will appear in the June *Ragged Left*. We will announce winners at the June chapter meeting. The new board takes office July 1, 2002.

Continued from page 4

#### **Writing API Documentation**

As an example, David showed us the API documentation available at the Web site of Enact, which provides "e-business solutions for project collaboration and communication." This also gave David the opportunity to explain Enact's 3-tiered architecture (server, applications, database) which again I won't go into here.

As an exercise, we documented two APIs that David provided, both from the Berkeley STC Web site. The first was the API for a set of files to use with server-side includes (SSIs) to create a history page of monthly meetings. The second was the API for a Perl script for automatically sending an email message in response to a request for a subscription entered on the Web site.

#### Javadoc and Doclets

No class on documenting APIs would be complete without Javadoc, and David did not disappoint us. "Javadoc is the tool from Sun Microsystems for generating API documentation in HTML format from doc comments in source code." That's straight from *www.java.sun.com/j2se/javadoc*, where you can find out lots more about it.

Given a set of source code, you can use Javadoc to create a set of documentation based on the code. The output is an HTML file called a doclet. The information that is generated about the objects and connections is 100% accurate. David says it is as useful as a dictionary.

As the documenter, you can add value to your doclets by adding and modifying comments in the code. These, of course, may not be 100% accurate if you're not careful. You can also modify the style sheet. The default includes several tags such as author, exception, param, return, see, version, and depreciate. As an in-class exercise, we ran Javadoc on the "Hello World" Java program that we had written. We then added comments to our program and reran it to see them appear in the doclet. Thrilling as always! David explained that how close we actually get to the code depends, of course, on where we are working. On some projects, we might be able to enter comments directly into the source code; on others, we might not be allowed near the code and will need to work through the developers.

#### Food, Fun, and Final Thoughts

The class was hard work, but we were sustained throughout with a series of breaks, meals, and treats to keep us awake and alert: doughnuts, muffins, fruit, sandwiches, and so many bottles of water that we could hardly sit still, much less fall asleep. The highlight was a lunch of gourmet burritos from just across the street from the Rockridge Branch Library where we met.

And at the end, did we think we would "feel comfortable producing API documentation"? Well, maybe not comfortable in the sense of free from stress or anxiety, but perhaps confident enough to give it a try. To paraphrase the old joke about engineers, "Yesterday, I couldn't spell API technical writer, but today I are one."

#### STC Berkeley Ragged Left Resource Corner

Each month rotating guest writers offer resources that benefit the technical writing industry. If there is a topic you would like to cover for a future edition, email newsletter@stc-berkeley.org.

# Unraveling the Secrets of UNIX

#### BY STEVE BYRON

The UNIX operating system (OS) is an integral part of so much of information technology today. Networking, the Internet, and large systems like those used by air traffic controllers rely on

UNIX as their operating platform. As online use and interconnectivity continue to grow, UNIX is becoming more and more commonplace. Some knowledge of UNIX is fast becoming crucial for technical communicators, since so much of what we write about is now, and will be, bound to UNIX. While it is not so hard to acquaint yourself with the

rudiments of UNIX, it does take considerable effort to master. First of all, UNIX commands are not all that intuitive. For example, you can create a file by using the "touch" command; you can view a file with the "cat" command (with "cat" being short for "concatenate," it doesn't help you as a memory aid). And if you want help on-line, do you enter "Help"? No, you enter "man."

An excellent introduction and reference for unravel-

ing the mysteries of UNIX is UNIX: Visual QuickStart Guide by Deborah S. Ray and Eric J. Ray (Peachpit Press, Berkeley, 1998). The authors, winners of both the STC's International Distinguished Technical Communication and International Excellence awards, have written a guide that is concise, easy to follow, humorous (without going overboard), and focuses on what you truly need to know to use UNIX. It uses visual aids (such as screenshots) rather than lengthy explanations. Relatively short (about 300 pages, not including appendices and the Index), it is not only intelligible to those with next to no UNIX knowledge (called "newbies" by experienced UNIX users), it provides plenty of information so that even experienced users can take advantage of it as a reference.

The first chapters show you how to get up and run-

The authors have written a guide that is concise, easy to follow, humorous and focuses on what you truly need to know to use UNIX ning with UNIX, and then the guide moves on to cover topics such as navigating though a directory structure, creating directories and files, and using applications like pico and vi editor. It even has a chapter on how to write scripts.

At the suggested retail price of \$17.99, the UNIX: Visual QuickStart Guide is

very affordable compared to the more daunting volumes on UNIX (and immensely easier to read and use). Spending just a little time with the Guide takes the mystery out of such cryptic terms as sudo, sed, and awk. I highly recommend UNIX: QuickStart Guide to any technical communicator that needs to learn UNIX from scratch, in a hurry, or simply needs a quick-reference.

## **One More Issue...**

As much as we hate to disappoint those of you who look forward to the tactile experience of holding your very own paper copy of the *Ragged Left* in your hands each month, the *Ragged Left* really is going HTML. There will be just one more dead-tree edition to fold, spindle and mutilate after this issue. Beginning with the July, 2002 edition, the *Ragged Left* will no longer be a printed newsletter mailed to members and interested subscribers. An HTML version of the *Ragged Left* will be available on the chapter Website at *www.stc-berkeley.org.* The use of an online medium to deliver the newsletter will save the chapter printing and mailing costs while increasing our capacity to provide you with current and relevant information.

For those of you who use the newsletter to prompt you about the monthly meeting, we suggest subscribing to the chapter announcement list. Each month an email message about the upcoming monthly meeting along with links to the online version of the newsletter and reservations page on the chapter Website will be sent to you. Through the summer months of 2002, we will also send a postcard reminder about where the *Ragged Left* has moved.



#### **STC Sacramento Chapter**

FIRST WEDNESDAY OF EACH MONTH HILTON SACRAMENTO ARDEN WEST, BRANDYWINE ROOM 6:15-6:45 P.M. NETWORKING 7:00-8:00 P.M. PROGRAM DETAILS: WWW.STCSACRAMENTO.ORG Wednesday, June 5, 2002: Program: Year-end wrap up party at Lance Gelein's

## STC East Bay Chapter

FIRST THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH CROW CANYON COUNTRY CLUB IN DANVILLE 5:30 P.M. - NETWORKING 6:30 P.M. - DINNER 7:30 P.M. - CHAPTER BUSINESS/PROGRAM RSVP IN WRITING, TWO DAYS IN ADVANCE DETAILS: HTTP://WWW.EBSTC.ORG/ Thursday, June 6, 2002

Program: Standing Out in the Crowd—Interview Techniques That Will Make You Memorable, withMark Shaltz

## **STC San Francisco Chapter**

THIRD WEDNESDAY OF EACH MONTH LONDON WINE BAR, SAN FRANCISCO 6:00 P.M.: NETWORKING AND SELF-SERVE HORS D'OEUVRES 7:00 P.M.: PROGRAM NO ADVANCE RESERVATION REQUIRED DETAILS: *HTTP://WWW.STC-SF.ORG* Wednesday, May 15, 2002 Program: *STC Annual Conference Recap,* with Susan Becker, Judith Plummer, Hillary Russak, and Paul Sinasohn

#### **STC North Bay Chapter**

THIRD THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH TRUETIME, INC.,3750 WESTWIND BLVD.,SANTA ROSA 5:30 P.M. - NETWORKING 6:30 P.M. - INTRODUCTIONS & ANNOUNCEMENTS 6:45 P.M. - PROGRAM 8:00 P.M. - CONVERSATION, IDEA SWAPPING NO RSVP NEEDED DETAILS: HTTP://WWW.STC-NORTHBAY.ORG/ Thursday, May 16, 2002 Check Website for latest details

#### **STC Silicon Valley Chapter**

FOURTH THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH7:00 FOUR POINTS SHERATON, SUNNYVALE 6:00 P.M. - NETWORKING, JOBS CORNER, AND DINNER 7:00 P.M. - ANNOUNCEMENTS 7:15 P.M. - PROGRAM RSVP BY MAIL, ONE WEEK IN ADVANCE DETAILS: HTTP://WWW.STC-SILICONVALLEY.ORG/ Thursday, May 30, 2002 Indexing with a Vengeance with Bonni Graham

Thursday, June 27, 2002 Volunteer Recognition Dinner

## **East Bay Editors Guild**

ROCKRIDGE LIBRARY 5366 COLLEGE AVENUE (AT MANILA), OAKLAND 7:00 P.M. - PROGRAM UPCOMING MEETING DATES: Monday, May 6, 2002 Program: Panel Discussion on Style

Monday, June 17, 2002

The meetings are held in the Rockridge Library's community room. Enter through the front door and come up the stairs. The front door may appear closed, but should not be locked; slide it open by hand.

Optionally, some members meet in front of the library at 5:40 for a no-host dinner at a nearby restaurant before the meeting. Check the door for a note naming the location.

Editors Guild welcomes everyone interested; there are no dues, fees, or membership required. To be added to the Editors Guild listserv, email *jyl@dolby.com*.

## **STC Berkeley Chapter**

JUNE 12, 2002 Psst, Wanna Buy Some Doc with Bonni Graham



P.O. Box 1007 Berkeley, CA 94701 Forwarding and Return Postage Guaranteed



#### May 8: Touchstone Tour

with a Panel From the Committee Meal reservations deadline: Monday, May 6. *See page 2 for costs and meeting details.* 

RSVP online: Credit cards accepted at www.stc-berkely.org. Vo's Vietnamese Restaurant: 59 Grand Avenue in Oakland Dinner Announcements and Program 7:30 - 9:00

Please do not call the restaurant!

## **STC-BERKELEY MEETING DIRECTIONS**

From north of Oakland: Take the I-80 West/I-580 East. Merge onto the I-580 East ramp towards downtown Oakland. Merge onto I-980 W. Take the 27th street exit towards West Grand Avenue. Merge onto Northgate Avenue. Turn left onto West Grand Avenue.

From south of Oakland: Take I-880 north from San Jose through Oakland. Take the Broadway exit towards downtown. Keep right at the fork in the ramp and merge onto Broadway. Turn right onto Grand Avenue.

From San Francisco: Take the Bay Bridge towards Oakland (I-80 East). At the end of the bridge, take the I-580 East ramp towards downtown Oakland (CA-24)/Hayward-Stockton. Merge onto I-580 E. Take I-980 West ramp towards downtown Oakland. Merge onto I-980 W. Take the 27th street exit towards West Grand Avenue. Merge onto Northgate Avenue. Turn left onto West Grand Avenue.

From far East Bay: Take Highway 24 west through Caldecott Tunnel. Highway 24 west becomes I-980 west. Take the 27th street exit towards West Grand Avenue. Merge onto Northgate Avenue. Turn left onto West Grand Avenue.

By BART: Exit the 19th Street Oakland station. Walk NE for four blocks, to Grand Avenue.

