

Main - FortytwoNameChange

Not only is the universe stranger than you imagine, it is stranger than you can imagine.
- J. S. B. Haldane

Time advances: facts accumulate; doubts arise. Faint glimpses of truth begin to appear, and shine more and more unto the perfect day. The highest intellects, like the tops of mountains, are the first to catch and to reflect the dawn. They are bright, while the level below is still in darkness. But soon the light, which at first illuminated only the loftiest eminences, descends on the plain, and penetrates to the deepest valley. First come hints, then fragments of systems, then defective systems, then complete and harmonious systems. The sound opinion, held for a time by one bold speculator, becomes the opinion of a small minority, of a strong minority, of a majority of mankind. Thus, the great progress goes on.
- Thomas Babington Macaulay

MY NAME HAS CHANGED

On 1998 March 19 I walked down to the Winona, MN courthouse and filled out the paperwork that would legally change my name from "Geoff David Busker" to "Geoff David Fortytwo". Fans of the author Douglas Adams will, of course, instantly recognize that 42 is the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything.

Cool huh? I'd been throwing around the idea for several months, but until Fortytwo came up I couldn't think of anything that fit all of my criteria. My requirements were as follows:

1. The name should be unique. In other words, no other human, living or dead, should ever have had the same last name as me. This is to prevent people from asking me: "So, are you really related to THE Einstein?"
2. It should be less than 10 letters. (If I hadn't had this as a prerequisite, I might have chosen "Ecstaticfuturist" as my last name. I was strongly considering it!)
3. The name must be spelled EXACTLY the same way that it sounds.
4. It should start with a letter early in the alphabet.
5. The name should be scientific sounding.

Little did I know that I would get 15 minutes of local fame out of this name change. On March 20, 1998, a reporter from the Winona Daily News interviewed me for an article that would appear as the [cover story for the Sunday, March 22, 1998 edition](#).

Then, on Sunday, March 22, 1998, before I had even read the article, I got a call from a reporter from KTTC/NBC out of Rochester, MN. He then drove over to my apartment an hour later and taped a short interview with me about my name change and the origin of the number 42.

On March 25, 1998, a radio station from Green Bay, WI called me up and talked with me on the air about my name change.

On March 26, 1998, I got filmed for a two minute segment that was aired on WKBT/CBS ch8 out of La Crosse, WI on the 6:00 news.

On March 26, 1998 (I think), a guy called me up and tried to convince me that my name had been changed to fortyfour. He sounded like a radio DJ, and considering it was 8:00 at night it seemed unlikely to me that he was from the courthouse. However, I played along with it for a little while. *smile*

On March 30, 1998, I was interviewed by my school paper, The Winonan.

On March 31, 1998, the radio station KROC out of Rochester talked with me on the air about the name change. After the show he invited me to get back in contact with him after I move out to California to talk about the reactions of my future coworkers at Intel.

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On April 1, 1998, an article appeared about my name change in the internet version of "[The Age](#)" in Melbourne, Australia. Here's a [local copy](#) of the article.

Here's the article about me from the Sunday, March 22, 1998 edition of the Winona Daily News:

Call me 42 WSU student wants last name to go by the number

By Doug Mattson
Winona Daily News

A Winona State University computer science student is going digital in more ways than one.

Before starting his new software programming job in Silicon Valley this summer, Geoff Busker hopes to legally become Geoff Fortytwo.

No hyphen, no decimal and no, he's not kidding.

"I can definitely see the humor in it, but I think it's humorous and cool," he says. "It's a name that I wouldn't mind being teased about because it obviously doesn't have any standard pattern.

"Most last names are just there, they have no meaning to them."

In the dictionary, busker means street performer, but for the future Mr. Fortytwo it was just too ? pedestrian.

For the past several months, Busker has wanted something steeped in science, just like he is. He considered Einstein, Newton, even Supernova.

Then he thought about some of his favorite science fiction, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," by Douglas Adams, a humorous take on the meaning of life that prompted a cult following and four follow-up novels. Busker expounds on the series on his web page (fortytwo.ecstaticfuturist.com).

Readers learn that 42 is "the answer to the ultimate question of life in the universe and everything," explains Busker, who's read all five books at least twice. "They had the answer, 42, but they had no idea what the question was."

Then, five minutes shy of learning the answer, Earth blows up.

"After long consideration, Fortytwo just seems to hit that sweet spot," Busker says. "It just feels right."

The change will mean getting a new birth certificate, driver's license, credit cards, paying a \$132 application fee and appearing in Winona County District Court next month. He formally applied for the change last week.

It's also meant telling his parents.

"I told them, 'This is not rebellion. I'm not doing it to get away from you guys or anything,' " Busker says. "I'm just doing this because I really just don't like having a name that means street performer. That just isn't appealing to me.

"When I came up with Fortytwo, that was appealing enough to change, and they said no problem."

David and Jean Busker of Ripon, Wis., have been accepting before. Father is a Methodist pastor, while his son espouses atheism; mother is a social worker, while her son embraces libertarianism.

Wearing a T-shirt showing a silkscreened circuit board, the 22-year-old Busker fidgets in his cramped but organized apartment on the edge of campus.

The walls are lined with shelves of computer texts, science fiction books, a keychain collection, sheets of computing codes, canned soup, sugared cereals and two maps of Silicon Valley.

He offers mini-marshmallows and points to Mountain View, Calif., where he'll start working for Intel after graduating in late May with degrees in computer science and physics.

Busker's approach to changing his name was almost scientific. He pulls out his Palm Pilot, a miniature computer screen holstered to his belt.

It can be uploaded and downloaded and contains addresses, appointments, a memo pad, his school transcripts, resume, computer passwords and the "prerequisites" for his new name.

Main - FortytwoNameChange

"I wanted the first letter to be early in the alphabet," he says. "I didn't want it to have been used by any human, alive or dead, I preferred that it be less than 10 letters and I wanted it to be spelled exactly like it sounds."

Busker can only guess that Fortytwo hasn't been used before. He said Romans named their children with numerals, referring to Octavius VIII, "so it's possible that somewhere along the line someone had 42 kids and named somebody 42, but the odds are unlikely."

Busker wanted the actual digits 4-2 but, knowing computers like he does, figured it would throw off the main frames at IRS and DMV that aren't used to used to numbers where letters usually are.

No matter what, though, the first name stays.

"There's just some sort of weird, emotional attachment that I sort of have for my first name," he says. "I never got used to my last name, but my first name, the way it's spelled, it just looks so nice. It's obviously a totally subjective thing, and I'm sure a lot of people should be able to relate to that."

Longterm, Busker can see sharing his new last name, forming a sum of 84.

"I'm not involved at all right now, but I'm hoping that someday, when I do get married, that she will want to take the name Fortytwo," he says. "I'm hoping for that."

Here's a copy of the blurb that appeared in the internet version of "[The Age](#)" in Melbourne, Australia on April 1, 1998.

Feed him to the Babelfish

Remember those people who spent the 1980s (and a lot of the '90s) reciting verbatim huge slabs of Monty Python scripts? The same characters usually specialised in regurgitating Douglas Adams' prose as well. We suspect that Geoff Busker from Minnesota is such a person. He is applying to change his name by deed poll to Geoff Fortytwo in honor of the punch-line to the search for the meaning of life in The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (yes, and only about 10 years too late, Geoff). It will surprise no-one that Geoff is a computer boffin and we humbly submit that he would be best avoided at dinner parties or other social gatherings.

Update 2008-07-30

It's funny, but after all these years I just learned that I was lucky that I didn't try to change my last name to the actual digits "42". It turns out that according to the supreme court of North Dakota [it is illegal](#) to have a name made purely of digits. I changed my name in Minnesota, so it may not have applied to me, but I agree with that court's opinion that having a last name made of digits would likely have caused me problems over the years because people simply wouldn't believe it was my name.

Having the name "Fortytwo" has not caused me any problems. People occasionally ask "Is that really your name?", but when I say yes they almost always just smile. Sometimes they say it's an interesting name. Occasionally they'll ask a followup question about what the origin of the name is.

It makes me a little sad that only rarely do people actually know the origin of the name before I tell them. Most people aren't very geeky and haven't read the books. The movie could have fixed that, but it just wasn't good enough to penetrate the public consciousness like the radio series did when it originally aired.

The primary benefit of the name has been to give a good impression to new people that I meet. It lets them know right off the bat what type of person I am.