Wiz All for Fiddling Under the Software Hood

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STALLMAN: Advocates software tinkering

Richard Stallman is one of those people who isn't famous but should be.

He is a legend among computer programmers. Stallman "arguably has had the single most important impact in computer software development in history," said University of New Mexico computer scientist David Bader.

Sitting Wednesday afternoon in a hall at UNM's Student Union Building waiting for Stallman to speak, the assembled geeks spoke about the 50-year-old Boston resident with reverence.

"He wrote the original Emacs," said one. "He wrote the original Gcc."

"Emacs" and "Gcc" might be foreign terms to non-geeks, but in the computer world, they are bedrock software.

When Bader, introducing Stallman, asked how many in the audience of some 300 used Emacs, it seemed as though half the hands in the room shot up.

"Thank you," a smiling Stallman said.

But if Stallman's software is a legend — Emacs, the powerful text editor he first wrote in 1975, is widely used by computer programmers today — it is what he

has done since that has made him a global figure in the technology world.

As founder of the Free Software Foundation and a project called GNU, Stallman pioneered the development of alternatives to the sort of proprietary commercial software developed by companies like Microsoft.

Stallman's fundamental principles are simple, he said during his

Programmer Favors Software Tinkering

UNM talk — software ought to be like a recipe. Cooks can change a recipe, improve it, or share it with their neighbor.

"These are actually the freedoms that cooks take for granted," Stallman said.

Software is a lot like a recipe — a set of instructions for carrying out a task. But commercial software prohibits the sort of freedoms in which Stallman believes. Microsoft Windows, for example, is a lock box. Users are not allowed to tinker with its innards, or share it with their neighbors.

Stallman believes that, if you want to, you should be able to tweak the software running on your computer.

Free software advocates often explain their movement with the phrase "free as in freedom, not free as in beer." For Stallman, "free" is not about a lack of cost, it is about the freedom for users to do what they want with their own computer.

He and his colleagues back up their views with software.

Stallman's GNU (the acronym is an old computer in-joke, "GNU's Not Unix") and the related Linux project offer a completely free, shareable alternative to commercial software for most basic tasks one could to on a computer.

For Stallman, it is a matter of principle. "Non-free software is ethically unacceptable," he said.