

Milestones

Our first classes were held in March of 1994 at the Willow Senior Center, a facility run by the City of San Jose Parks and Recreation Department. Because of the limited number of computers we had our students share usage. Each student would get the computer for one hour while the other student would observe and act as a coach. At the time we offered only one class, "Introduction to Computers."



By December of 1995, the number of computers had increased to 17, the number of volunteers was 69, and the number of applications for enrollment had surpassed 1000.

In April of 2000, the San Jose SNLC split and formed two new centers in San Jose, Almaden and Cypress. At that time San Jose SNLC changed its name to "Willows SNLC."

On August 24, 2002 the Willows SeniorNet Learning Center sponsored the SeniorNet Western Regional Meeting. The Willow SNLC hosted six other learning centers from the region. The agenda included informational talks in the morning that were followed by break out session to cover topics important to the individual centers after a catered lunch.

In March 2004, Willows celebrated its 10th anniversary with a banquet that was attended by over 200.

Since inception this learning center has provided 853 classes to over 11,000 students. This required 66,800 volunteer hours in instructing, coaching and administration.

Contributions and Innovations

The Willows center has been active in developing courses for our students. Many of these courses have been included in SeniorNet's Leadership Exchange website for other learning centers to utilize. Below is a list of courses which originated from the Willows Learning Center:

Introduction to Computers by Alan Hubbard
Graphics and Scanning by Pam Huffman
Internet by Walt Fant
Using Email by Phil Carnahan
Create a CD in Windows XP by Phil Carnahan
Introduction to the Internet & Email by Allen Greenberg
Introduction to Windows (2 editions) by Allen Greenberg
Word (a 3 session course) by Janice Santos and Bill Souza
Genealogy using FTM (3 editions) by Joe Russo
Digital Music Library by Bruce Pumplin

Greeting Cards & More by Janice Santos
Buying and Selling on Ebay by Don Ferguson
Next Class after Introduction by Miles Welter

Equipment better than San Jose State!



When Janice Santos visited the Center shortly after her retirement in 1997, she observed that the equipment was better than the labs at San Jose State where she had been working. She was also impressed with the class offerings and the fun, encouraging climate in the classes.

In 2007, the computers were upgraded to machines running an AMD Athlon 64 microprocessor running at 2.0 GHz, with 1 gigabyte of RAM, an 80 GB hard drive and DVD read/write capability.

In addition we have installed a brighter projector and screen for easier viewing. The hearing impaired have not been forgotten either. SeniorNet Willows, with aid from the City of San Jose, recently installed an audio/loop sound amplification system for those who are hearing impaired. The instructor wears a cordless microphone, and the signal is amplified and broadcast by a total of four loud speakers, one in each corner of the room. In addition, for those who have a hearing aid with a "T-coil" in it, the coil is able to receive the signal directly into the hearing aid for improved listening.



This is a far cry from the early days of 12 students sharing 6 computers for now we have 17 students, each at their own computer with a DSL connection to the Internet. Even simple things like a laser pointer makes teaching much easier according to instructor Allan Greenberg.

Innovation in restoring computers after use by students



One of the major problems with teaching Windows in the classroom was the concern about students accidentally changing the way Windows worked or making it not work at all or changing the way the monitor display appeared. Volunteer Allan Greenberg was always anxious covering some of this type of material in class. Indeed, seven people needed a solid week in between sessions to clean up the systems, update software, and restore machines to a consistent configuration according to Ron Springer. Then Greenberg located a program called DeepFreeze which caused anything done by the student to be erased upon the next startup of the machine. Soon SeniorNet purchased this program for all its centers.

Our Registration Lottery



Not all contributions are technical. According to volunteer Jerry White, in the early years registration was held on a first come, first serve basis on Saturday mornings. Registration would start at 9 a.m. and people started showing up at 6 am in an effort to secure a class due to the high demand. Then the students themselves organized and started serving coffee and donuts. Soon the students put up a board which gave an indication of the classes offered on the upcoming session.

Then a student, Charlie, started serving beans to the folks early in the morning. The Office of the Senior Center got wind of this and told him to stop. The rules say that people can't serve foods such as beans without proper preparation. Charlie left and joined the center at Almaden.

One couple spent the night in the car sleeping so they could get a good place in line. On the one hand the leadership was telling the people not to come early, but the system in place rewarded those who got their early. Hence, the "first come first serve" system was discontinued.

The leadership started a lottery system to determine which people had first choice of class. As people arrive at 9 a.m., they pick a number out of a box. That determines their priority in selecting a class.

Windows in the Willows - the User Group



One of the spin-off services provided by our learning center is a User Group. Started in 1998 by Tom Wilson, its early function was to answer questions about computers that were unique to one person's machine or need. We soon realized that we could get speakers to visit our group to discuss products currently available since we are in the middle of Silicon Valley. A few of the recent speaker's topics include:

- Adobe Photoshop Elements
- How to Use and Maximize Google
- Technical Editor from the San Jose Mercury News
- Microsoft demonstration of Vista

Benefits of SeniorNet classes



When asked why they joined SeniorNet, all say that they learn new computer skills. But many echoed Willy Riemersma's sentiment that they meet many nice, wonderful people who share a common goal - to continue to use your brain. Others find that it gives them a reason to stay current on technological advances. And of course, it gives them one more reason to do their recreational shopping at Fry's.

Inspiration

Santos found tremendous inspiration in her oldest student (so far) at 85 years of age who had never touched a computer before; yet she was willing to accept new challenges and keep growing.



Riemersma coached a student who had problems with his eyesight, but his determination to learn earned him great respect. Willows has offered a class in Accessibility for the visually impaired given by a teacher afflicted with macular degeneration, Judy Moak.

The Future ?

When SeniorNet Willows started in 1994, only three computer had an Internet connection and it was dial up.; now all 17 computers have DSL. We have already transitioned from floppy disks to CDs but now the use of thumb/flash drives for file storage is recommended. There was no projector in front of the class to enable the students to see what the instructor is doing. There were no video or audio podcasts to download. There were no personal web pages, no blogs nor RSS feeds. There was no Google or E-bay; no voice over Internet. There were no digital cameras and now we offer four classes in various aspects of digital photography. There weren't as many viruses or worms, but today there is antivirus software and firewalls.

Greenberg predicts we will see more "online" classes. In addition we will see more emphasis on digital photo and audio processing and editing. Will everybody be computer literate in 10 years or will there be a constant introduction of new products requiring new courses? One thing we can count on is change.

Continued Willows Learning Center profile: [Willows Learning Center Awards](#)