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by Mayra Flores De Marcotte

The halls at the Willows Senior Center echo with the chatter of the keyboards inside the classrooms.

The scene has changed since SeniorNet's beginning in Willow Glen 13 years ago. More than 6,000 local seniors have joined the high-tech generation by replacing their typewriters and stationery with laptops and desktops, thanks to the nonprofit group's efforts and the volunteers who donate their time to gently lead seniors into the high-tech world.

Photograph above by Vicki Thompson

A senior citizen learns basic computer skills as part of an introduction to computers class with the SeniorNet program, which provides computer education and access to those 50 and older.

"Early on, only a few of the people that came here owned a computer," says SeniorNet instructor Jerry White. "Less than 20 percent owned one, and they were doing it because they wanted to keep up with their grandkids. Now, almost 90 percent have their own computers and want simply to know how to use them."

White has been part of the program for the last 15 years.

SeniorNet provides computer education and access to those 50 and older. The courses range from digital images to fun with graphics to using the Internet and the Microsoft Windows XP operating system. Currently, 16 courses are available at the center.

A retired clinical chemist, White found out about the program after reading about it in a newspaper.

"When we started out, we were the only show in town," he says.

SeniorNet, founded in 1986 began as a research project. SeniorNet's goal is to get seniors online. The group, headquartered in Santa Clara, has more than 130 learning centers across the nation. One of three San Jose centers, the Willow Glen chapter founded in 1994 is the largest in the nation, according to its founders.

"IBM gave us some computers to get us under way," White says. "That was the beginning."

White had headed the chemistry section in the pathology department at O'Connor Hospital. He trained and lectured and had always been involved in teaching, so when he was approached to be an instructor at SeniorNet, he agreed.

"This is just a continuation of the same thing," he says.

At the program, there are two kinds of students who register for classes, White says. "We have people who really want to learn and others who just want to get out of the house," he says.

Both reasons are equally important, White says.

"It's an excellent atmosphere," he says. "Both for the students and the staff, it's like a club."

When the program began, most who enrolled were men, but that has changed, White says.

"Now there's a lot of women here as well," he says. "We're moving out of the Dark Ages."

The schedule is broken into five sessions a year, each held once a week for two hours over the course of eight weeks. Class sizes range from six to 17 students, with a teacher and up to five coaches.

"I meet a lot of wonderful people here," White says. "I'm 84 years old, but when I see a 94-year-old trying to learn and if we can afford them an opportunity, that makes me happy."

The senior programming aims to entice the students to learn more, to further their understanding through creative subjects such as genealogy and photo editing.

John McCoulloch found SeniorNet after he went blind in one eye and had to put down his wood-carving tools.

He began as a coach for some of the classes. He'd make sure the seniors would be on the same page as the instructors.

"What it did is open some doors to interests I never thought I would have," he says.

He became interested in genealogy and digital photography and enrolled in classes.

"I was looking for another hobby," McCoulloch says. "This one hobby turned into many."

As he watched the many volunteers around him in and out of the classroom, McCoulloch wanted to do more.

He became involved in the group's council, helped with the class registration and began handling the publicity for the program.

"It's a hell of an organization, and I want to keep it that way," McCoulloch says. "I feel responsibility to fill the classrooms."

He joined the ranks and became one of more than 100 volunteers involved with the program.

"We are just a bunch of hard-working people that are dedicated and like what they do," McCoulloch says, "and are thankful for the opportunity to keep this going."

Even at the program's beginnings, volunteers were found around each bend.

"Working with this group, I don't really have to chase anyone to do a class," says co-founder Bill Souza. "It's easy to get people to step up."

Souza had retired from IBM and was looking for a way to enable himself and a group of colleagues to learn how to use a personal computer.

Issues at IBM in trying to secure time in the computer lab for the group led Souza and co-founder Phil Carnahan to come up with a local SeniorNet. The results still amaze Souza.

"We just wanted to keep our seniors mentally active and challenged," he says. "We never expected it to go on as long as it has."

Although the goals have stayed consistent since the beginning, the focus has shifted.

"The first four years the courses that were offered all were introduction and beginning classes," Souza says. "The major change has been the move into higher technology and digital photography. Technology is moving, and seniors are right there with it."

Potential students pay a member fee to SeniorNet of $40 for one year. Then, they pay $20-$30 for the courses.

For more information about SeniorNet computer classes, visit http://www.snlcsj.org, or call 408.448.6400. SeniorNet is located at Willow Senior Center, 2175 Lincoln Ave.