Making A
CONNECTION

Peninsula computer center helps experts, novices learn the ropes

By Meredith Grenier
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In computer circles, novices and experts rarely speak the same language.

But at Palos Verdes on the NET Computer Technology Center, neophytes.and wizards are equal-opportunity learners. Here their computer expertise can excel, regardless of their technological baseline.

What's more, the nonprofit center, adjacent to Rancho Palos Verdes City Hall, offers an atmosphere of camaraderie and helpfulness in which no one is a computer snob. For as little as $11 a month, attendees can take classes, workshops and practice sessions offered nearly every day Some are free. All that is needed is a willingness to learn.

"We are all-volunteer operated," says Ted Vegvari, 46, the center's brainchild and personal underwriter. "We have met with other cities and estimate it would cost from $300,000 to $400,000 a year to duplicate this facility using a paid staff."

Participants range from retirees learning simple keyboarding skills or programs such as Microsoft Word and Excel.to high school students gaining expertise with everything from games to programs such as Photoshop. Other participants learn Web page design and build computers from scratch.

An immediate side effect to improved computer skills is personal empowerment, says Vegvari. Seniors regain dignity, no longer fearing they'll become technological dinosaurs in the 21st century, while computer-savvy kids find their social skills soar as they gain acceptance in the eyes of their peers.

In addition to classes and workshops, Vegvari oversees a group of about 20 to 50 intermediate and high school interns who learn to operate up to 50 different areas of computer technology, including professional editing equipment similar to that used in the movie "Titanic." An intern recently made an animated video of Rancho Palos Verdes using advanced technology that the center didn't have when it opened in October 1996.

For two years before the center's debut. Vegvari and Pam Piller, a full-time volunteer, held monthly meetings at the Peninsula Center Library, where Vegvari carried in 10 computers on which to give demonstrations. To date, more than 12,000 people have visited the center and about 800 visitors an hour log onto its Web site.

"It's like the ultimate directory and information system for the Peninsula," says Vegvari. "We want the cities and residents to post information at no cost to them."

At a recent afternoon workshop, Rancho Palos Verdes resident Richard Ohtomo demystified the Excel program for eight other seniors. The former Hughes Aircraft Company engineer/manager retired five years ago and teaches the program on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He also attends a computer-related investment club (open to all) at 7 p.m. on the first and third Wednesdays and a health club, which discusses informative health sites at 7 p.m. the second Wednesday.

"I get a kick out of helping people. It is a real nice feeling," he says.

As class members wait for Ohtomo to begin, attendee Deanna Richter shares tips with a novice student about Microsoft Word, a program which she had learned several weeks earlier. She could relate to the new student's keeling of hopelessness.

"In September I bought a new Gateway computer and I turned it on and didn't know what to do," says Richter. "I had a 10-year-old computer and I knew some things so I didn't need to start from scratch. Even so, I was frustrated.. I would call up for help and didn't know what they were talking about. Here you ask a question and you get a simple answer that you understand. No question is considered stupid," she says.

San Pedro resident Dave Wadsworth, 29, a free-lance video editor, says the center will provide all the computer know-how one can handle, but no software.

"Ted has been very conscientious about making sure no one takes any software, and he won't allow anyone to install any he hasn't paid for," says Wadsworth. The center is the fulfillment of a dream for Vegvari, who had a "bad computer experience" as a young boy when he participated in a computer programming class for kids at TRW that was way over a child's head.

"I swore I never would touch a computer again," says Vegvari, who is divorced and has lived in Palos Verdes Estates five years. He grew up in the South Bay, graduating from Gardena High School.

"As an adult, that spurred me to create an atmosphere for people who fear computers – for kids who think they are not bright enough and for adults who are afraid. This is the buzz. You can't turn around without hearing about computers. It is not going to slow down and it is not too late to enjoy some aspects of computers."

To this end, Vegvari, who is in the process of selling his consulting firm, PC Lab, put up most of the capital for the nonprofit center. He hopes it will become self-supporting this year. Some donations of computers, equipment and software originally were made by computer companies and local corporations. Now, the center rebuilds the out-of-date computers and donates them to schools in Mexico.

Workshops & classes

What: low-cost or free computer training center for children and adults.

Where: Palos Verdes on the NET Computer Technology Center, 30940 Hawthorne Blvd., Suite 101, Rancho Palos Verdes.

When: Daily workshops and classes.

Admission: Six-month memberships for unlimited instruction, $65-$100; workshops on individual topics or programs, free to $15. Other: Free Web-page design for local cities or nonprofit groups.

Hours: 2-7 p.m., Tuesdays through Friday; 1-7 p.m. Saturdays. Plus free web-design workshop for members Wednesdays, 7:30-9 p.m.

Information: Call 541-7992 or visit www.palosverdes.com/computercenter.

Vegvari sees his center as a place where participants can both hone individual skills and give back to the community. Interns and other regulars take on sophisticated projects using three dozen computers and other high-tech equipment. They produce videos or cable television segments and design Web pages for South Bay cities and nonprofit organizations, such as Lomita Little League or the Wayfarers' Chapel.

"We will design Web sites for local cities for free if they will agree to budget the money they save toward upgrading their computer equipment and training their personnel," says Vegvari. "If we can help city governments get online and have interaction with communities, everyone benefits."

Culminating a 6-month internship program, Vegvari and 10 interns recently installed about 52 computers at Rancho Palos Verdes City Hall. They were built from scratch under Vegvari's tutelage. Last year the center installed a complete network for Rolling Hills Estates.

For Vegvari personally, the project is a way of giving back for a successful career that began when he studied business and computers at El Camino College, UCLA and Cal State Long Beach. By college age, he already was self-employed. His career progressed into the music business. which led to his purchase of Jose Feliciano's production studio in Orange County at age 27.

"As the digital revolution took hold, it took me with it. We were ahead of the curve in analog and digital technology, and some of my clients asked for help in automating their businesses. As a result we found ourselves in computer technology."

The center has an immediate need for 10 to 15 volunteers to handle administrative or computer tasks. Workshops are under way daily.

Starting this month the center will accept applications for its computer summer camp for students entering second to seventh graders, 9 a.m. to noon. Four, two-week sessions from June 28 through Aug. 20 will be held with two instructors and classes, no larger than 10. Topics include, Powerpoint, Web-page design. Word, Excel and Photoshop. For registration or information call Pam Piller at the center.

Also application kits are now available for summer intern programs for ages 12 through 18 and 18 through adult.