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PVNET Links with RSVP to Help Non-profits

By Michelle Fisher
Special to the News

When President Bush asked Americans to volunteer in his State of the Union address, thousands responded.

Locally, the South Bay branch of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, or RSVP, experienced a sharp rise in its membership. And those numbers are sure to increase. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (www.cns.gov), nearly 79 million baby boomers are getting ready to retire.

"Seniors are coming in larger numbers since the president's State of the Union message calling on Americans to volunteer," says Hope Witkowsky, director of the Torrance-based RSVP. "The increase has really been in terms of baby boomers, people with more technical skills."

To meet the needs of the new computer-savvy senior, RSVP recently joined forces with Palos Verdes on the Net (PVNET) in Rancho Palos Verdes. It's a match made in non-profit heaven because both organizations will benefit from the alliance.

RSVP matches the personal interests and skills of older Americans with opportunities to help solve community problems. "What we do is place seniors in meaningful volunteer positions at non-profit agencies. They meet a need that's not being met in the non-profit," says Witkowsky.

PVNET joins a registry of 80 non-profit organizations from El Segundo to

San Pedro that lend a hand to local hospitals, schools, libraries and law-enforcement agencies. Still others help to feed the homeless or assist in Neighborhood Watch programs.

"We're getting more of the baby boomer-type who is looking for technical work and short-term projects. I knew PV on the NET was something they would really like," Witkowsky says.

She has already sent several seniors to the non-profit computer center located next to RPV City Hall, which is run by Executive Director Ted Vegvari and a staff of interns.

Herb Stark is the RSVP volunteer who encouraged the partnership between the two groups. Stark, who also volunteers at the Museum of Flying in Hawthorne and the Maritime Museum in San Pedro, says he has always wanted to volunteer at PVNET because of the technology it makes available to the public.

"I like working on web pages," says Stark, who retired from Northrop 11 years ago. "Also, I knew it would give me an opportunity to volunteer and give some help to a non-profit organization."

When he isn't building web pages, Stark is busy trying to spread the word about the various services PVNET offers free of charge to non-profit groups.

Although the computer center is a household name on the Hill, he would like to reach more groups in the South Bay area. RSVP, he says, is already helping him achieve this by sending more seniors to the center.

"As seniors come here from all over the South Bay, they'll become ambassadors for the center," he says.

Helping Non-profits Help Themselves

Despite their different functions, both RSVP and PVNET share the same goal: helping non-profit groups. PVNET offers local non-profits a package of services that includes an interactive calendar system, list server program and web site. According to Vegvari, about 400 organizations are currently in the calendar database system, where their events are listed along with contact and general information. Users can personalize this calendar to fit their own interests and receive e-mail notification of related events.

"Groups can put all their events on the PVNET web page calendar. In order for that to be a really effective tool, you need to get as many people as possible to sign up to it," Stark says.

PVNET

Continued from Page 1

With the list server, organizations can create "an interactive, e-mail based chat system," explains Vegvari. "If you're managing a group with more than 10 people in it, you need this mail program. The results of your work all come down to one factor: time. If you spend time addressing things and sending multiple copies to people, that's taking time away from creative activities," he says.

Stark says the list server establishes one centralized mailing list that can be accessed by every member of an organization. Members can also be assigned different access levels that, for example, enable only certain people to make changes to the mailing list.

"The other thing I'm trying to do is make non-profits aware that they also can have a free web page on PVNET," Stark says. "The Museum of Flying in Hawthorne was paying \$40 a month for its web site, so when I found out about Ted's facility, I transferred the page and saved them money every month."

So far, Stark has brought in six new non-profit groups that are benefiting from these services. He says that once people see how easy the system is to use, they are eager to sign on.

"The calendar and list server are means of communicating," Stark says. "There are a lot of small organizations that don't have the budget to advertise. These are worthy organizations. This is going to give them a way to advertise at no cost.

"These organizations are trying to help the community, but you can't help if no one knows what you're about."

Volunteers Benefit

Dave Wright is one of the RSVP volunteers who will help Stark spread the word about PVNET. Like Stark, he is a retired engineer who would like to continue using his computer skills — and build on them as well.

"What I wanted to do was get more involved in the Internet, web pages and that kind of stuff. This is an opportunity to help out and to learn something for myself," Wright says.

Right now the two men are creating a PowerPoint presentation they can use to dazzle non-profit groups that may not know about PVNET. It has only been a month since he retired, but Wright says he is ready to get to work again.

As a member of the South Bay Astronomical Society, Wright spends time teaching kids and their parents about the constellations. "They ooh and ah about it. That type of interaction is what I'm looking for also," he says.

Stark, too, enjoys working with young people. At PVNET, he interfaces with two college interns. At the Museum of Flying in Hawthorne, he designed the children's web page. Next, he plans to redesign it, along with Wright, and learn the software Coldfusion in the process.

"I'm trying to do something for the kids. I ran the children's program at the Hawthorne museum, bringing kids in and getting them stimulated about learning," Stark says.

Roger Mills began volunteering at PVNET shortly after it opened five years ago. Mills uses his computer knowledge to help another segment of the population eager to learn about the wonders of the computer — seniors.

"I got into software in 1951, so when I heard about the computer center, I went down and volunteered," Mills says. "I teach anybody who comes

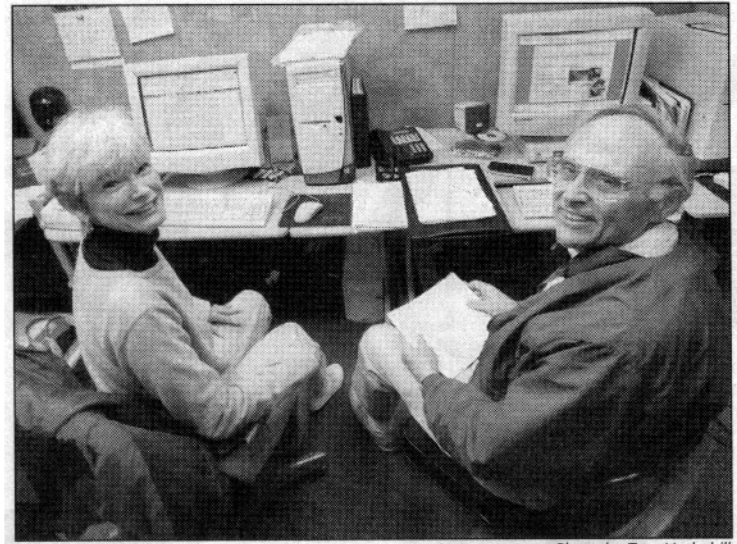


Photo by Tom Underhill

Betty Riedman and Herb Stark get ready for another day of inputting, updating and general computer workmanship.

through the door, mostly adults. A few want to improve their computer skills, but mostly they're seniors who just got a computer and don't know what to do with it. I walk them through it in Introduction to Computing. It's really fun."

Mills has remained at the center because he enjoys the "friendly" atmosphere and mix of people, old and young, working together.

"People are happy to share and happy to learn," he says.

Another volunteer, Betty Riedman, says she came to PVNET a year and a half ago because she knew it was a place where she could learn a few things while helping her community.

"Like most people who retire, I was looking for something to do," Riedman says. "I told Ted that I didn't want to do clerical stuff, I wanted to learn how to do web pages and, bless his heart, he let's me do it. I've been creating web pages for some of the non-profits."

Riedman has learned several programs, including Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, Dreamweaver and Coldfusion. "The advantage of volunteering is that it's something I want to do, not something I have to do. There is so much to learn; I don't think I've even scratched the surface," she says.

As PVNET and RSVP put seniors to work, it is clear that the non-profit groups aren't the only ones benefiting from the experience.

"In the process of providing a service to PVNET, seniors also get a feeling that they're helping the public to get educated about services in their particular community," says Witkowsky. "Non-profits usually don't have enough staff, so they need somebody to help out with this stuff. And seniors are ready and willing to help."

For information, call PVNET at 541-7992 or go to www.palosverdes.com/computercenter. For information on RSVP, call 320-3322 or go to www.rsvpsb.org.