

## SeniorNet Wellington - A brief history

### The early years

It all started in May 1991 when Earle Adams, Chairman of the Wellington Branch of the Retired Persons Association of New Zealand invited Grant Sidaway of Telecom New Zealand to speak about modern communication technology. His address included a video of SeniorNet activity in USA founded in 1986.



Interest aroused from the meeting prompted a well attended seminar in Wellington on 4 February 1992. Enthusiasm from those present translated into a SeniorNet Learning Centre officially opened by the Governor-General Dame Catherine Tizard on 10 April 1992.

The first premises, just one room, but of generous proportions, was in the Betty Campbell Centre, situated above the parking floors in the James Smith car park building.

The initial 45 members were able to choose computer courses about word processing, spread sheets, databases and communications. Very few of the original members actually owned a computer. Earle Adams was the first Chairman and by the time of the first AGM on 7 April 1993 membership had risen to more than 200.

Internet existed at the time but not the World Wide Web. A connection via America Online with SeniorNet San Francisco was only used once or twice with great difficulty. Early communication courses concentrated on the use of bulletin boards.

### The development years

Membership continued to increase. By 1998, and only 6 years later, membership had increased to 720 and by 2003 had peaked to about 1,100. Existing members had extended their learning to a wider range of courses beyond the basics. These included scanning, computer maintenance, anti-virus programs, digital photo imaging and CD burning. Many new members, already with some skills came with the desire to progress in courses such as browsing the internet, digital photo enhancement, and publishing their stories.

By now many of our long standing and experienced members were providing a huge contribution to SeniorNet Wellington. Many were now tutoring and leading the advancement of SeniorNet in several ways. SeniorNet Wellington had developed a strong team to not only lead and manage the affairs of the club, but also extend their knowledge and experience to many emerging clubs around the country.

Members brought with them special talents and skills. These included writing course manuals to provide step by step guidelines for the variety of courses offered. As new programs and software emerged the manuals were quickly updated. The manuals were readily made available to other SeniorNets throughout the country. Many course notes are still used and regarded highly. Administrative support to record and manage applications for membership and courses kept a team of members busy. Tutor clinics were held regularly to enable tutors to keep pace with new developments. Newsletters were published periodically to keep members well-informed of the activities.

Technical expertise had grown within the organisation to maintain and purchase equipment for classroom teaching and provide an office database system for all transactions. As such technical problems were rare and if they occurred, would be solved very quickly.

As interest in SeniorNet grew around the country, members of SeniorNet Wellington willingly played a leading role in helping clubs establish their organisations, plan and organise training programmes, and to start tutoring. Developing links with Aoraki Polytechnic provided support that eventually led to continued funding from the Tertiary Education Commission.

There were many in those early years that voluntarily played a leading part in promoting the role of SeniorNet and the opportunities to help each other learn what computer technology can offer.

### A broader spectrum

By the early 2000's the basic and advanced structured courses continued to be the main emphasis for the learning centre. But interest in these was gradually waning. Aspirations of existing and new members to broaden their knowledge had become more evident. Having attended the introduction and basic courses many members, with more confidence were looking to advance their new found skills in the wider areas of computer technology. Course options were extended to cover more learning opportunities. Courses on desktop publishing, genealogy records, typography, making small booklets, zipping and unzipping files, picture enhancement, and gift tags were some of additional courses offered.

Two hour workshops were starting to be popular. Workshops such as email enhancement, shortcuts, java script, downloading installing and deleting programs, virus protection and digital camera were some of the activities offered.

Monthly meetings of special interest groups were flourishing. The Computer Owners Group, set up to discuss the more technical issues and supplemented with a monthly newsletter had been operating for a number of years. A Question and Answers Group was gaining a new lease of life and there was steady interest from members for the Communications Group on internet and email issues.

### Consolidating years

The pattern of learning had been established. Incoming members new to computers were encouraged to enrol in the basic courses to give them a good grounding before advancing further.

Course notes were revised and re-written to cope with changes in operating systems and software. The technical team kept the machines performing well and as changes occurred, systems were upgraded and new equipment purchased. Refresher courses were held for tutors to keep pace with the changes. Members were regularly updated.

Towards the end of the decade leading up to 2010 total membership was slowly declining. With an older age group there was a natural attrition. In addition many new members were not progressing beyond the introduction and basic courses. For the year ended 31 March 2011 membership numbers were down to 799, about 300 less

than the peak time of ten years before. However by that time over 3,800 people had taken up membership at some stage.

### In recent times – a new decade – working towards the future

Concern about whether SeniorNet was responding to the wishes of an emerging older population in technological issues led the Executive to call a Special meeting in February 2011. Its purpose was to explore present and future technology challenges for older adults and how SeniorNet Wellington could cater for future needs. The meeting was well attended and many views for the future were expressed. Since that time many changes have been introduced to provide learning opportunities for older people at all levels of computer know-how. Structured courses will continue but for shorter times, workshops on topical issues have expanded, mini hands-on workshops have developed, visits to places of information interest have been established, newsletters and other communications are mostly emailed, additional upmarket equipment has been acquired, member days have been held and visitor sessions for prospective members made more informative on what SeniorNet does and how it can help older folk keep pace with changing technology.

### **Beyond 20 years**

During the past twenty years SeniorNet has provided a pathway for older people to participate electronically in a meaningful and enjoyable manner.

The next twenty years are bound to see continued developments in new technology at an ever increasing rate. Baby boomers born between the late 1940's and early 1960's are today's senior citizens. At present they are coping with and enjoying sophisticated computers with great capacity as well as new smart phones, tablets, etc. and in the near future perceptual computing. People born in the 1970's will be approaching the "older adult" status in 20 years and they too, as new technologies are introduced, will want to maintain an important and key role in technological societies of the future.

As different bands of generations mature, SeniorNet's continuing mission is to provide them with an opportunity to keep pace with and enjoy the benefits of the ever changing developments in computer and communications technology.