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WIRED FOR SUCCESS: Santa Ynez Valley Technology Club reaches out to students, seniors

STEVE BONSER, NEWS-PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

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The lush, pastoral hills of the Santa Ynez Valley seem a world away from the mid-March gang brawl that has blemished downtown Santa Barbara's reputation as one of America's safest cities.

Although youth crime is practically a rarity "in the valley," just last month tires were punctured on more than 15 vehicles in Solvang and Santa Ynez by vandals during a weekend spree. While no arrests have been made to date, the Sheriff's Department reports that witnesses saw high-school-age adolescents in the areas where the vandalism occurred.

As parents and teachers in Santa Barbara grapple with solutions to avert more gang violence, a small group of businesspeople who call the valley home are quietly opening up the world of technology to students in area schools and the community.

Deborah Dawicki, a database administrator at Medtronic Neurosurgery in Goleta, says she started the Santa Ynez Technology Club in part to mentor teens and promote smart career choices, a role that has lately taken on new significance. According to Ms. Dawicki, over the past two years the group has visited schools, provided computer training to young and old and donated refurbished PCs to area organizations.

She said the idea for the club was sparked by a July 2005 article by News-Press reporter Nora Wallace. The profile of Ms. Dawicki mentioned that the new arrival to Solvang was interested in forming two groups -- one to help newcomers socialize and perhaps another for technology professionals.

"I was looking for a way to network with like-minded professionals and put our shared interest in technology to good use," she recalled.

Now, she said, she's been able to accomplish both with the burgeoning tech club.

"Even though our meetings and programs with students and seniors have a tech focus, it goes much beyond that," Ms. Dawicki said. "Technology connects people, but it's how it changes people's lives that has the most meaning."

After the story appeared, Ms. Dawicki was contacted by several valley residents, including Chris Chirgwin, CEO of Lanspeed, a Santa Barbara computer consulting firm.

"Having just relocated to Buellton, I was actively looking for opportunities to make technology more immediate to both kids and seniors," he said.

The group began in July 2005 with informal mixers similar to the Santa Barbara Technology Group's popular Tech Brew, but on a smaller scale. The meetings, which are open to the public, are held monthly at the Meadows restaurant at the Royal Scandinavian Inn. Among the regular participants are Steven Battaglia, a former theme park designer; Tracy Bear, a network administrator at the Santa Ynez YMCA; and Dr. David Retz, a veteran of the tech industry and one of the original developers to work on the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) at UCSB, the precursor to today's Internet.

"Dave is not related to Al Gore," Dr. Retz's profile page on SYV Online says jokingly in a humorous reference to the former vice president's oft-repeated claim to be the "father of the Internet."

As the owner of SYV Online, a small Internet provider serving Solvang, Los Olivos, Santa Ynez, Buellton, Los Alamos and Ballard, Dr. Retz's homey Web site is akin to a virtual potbelly stove in a general store where valley residents can connect and share thoughts. It's also been helpful for plugging the SYV Tech Club into the community.

"The tech club is a great idea," said Dr. Retz, who speaks to groups on topics ranging from wireless sensors to building Web sites. "We have horse clubs and other such organizations, but there's a real need here for getting technology out into the community."

Other presenters to the club have included Kevin Mills, CEO of Carpinteria-based network security firm Demarc, and Paul Valenzuela, an instructor and network manager at UCSB.

Although the group typically initiates its own outreach projects, it happily responds to requests for its expertise.

After hearing about their services, Jennifer Pedersen, the GATE program coordinator at Solvang School, called Ms. Dawicki to arrange a classroom visit with fifth-graders. As the administrator of the Gifted and Talented Education curriculum at the elementary school, Ms. Pederson hoped that meeting people working in technology would make it a more tangible career choice for the students.



Deborah Dawicki says that the Santa Ynez Valley Tech Club opens students' eyes to the career opportunities offered in the technology sector.

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"We spoke about technology from our own personal perspectives," Ms. Dawicki said. During the question-and-answer session, it was clear that the talk had sparked the imaginations of the students. "Although they had some questions about what a database administrator does, they couldn't stop asking Steven (Battaglia) about his work designing theme parks."

The groups said that an equally rewarding experience has been their ongoing involvement with the Buellton Senior Center, a drop-in facility that provides a meeting place for area residents.

"I was driving by the building every day and suggested it when we were talking about what else the club could do," Mr. Chirgwin said. "The center now refers people to us for home visits about basic computer training. Mostly, they want to know about using e-mail and getting around the Internet."

"The valley has a lot of people from the tech sector, many of whom are not yet involved in our club. Our goal is to bring them together and provide our services to as many organizations as we can."

Ms. Dawicki said that in the coming months visits are being planned with the Santa Ynez 4-H Club, the Santa Ynez High School and more senior residences.

"We have a drive to put technology into people's lives and steer young people toward rewarding careers," she said. "In response, the community is telling us they want more."

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