

TEN YEARS YOUNG

SeniorNet at FSL, L.I. (SN at FSL) has reached a proud milestone - it is 10-years YOUNG. Young, because while many organizations its age would have already seen its' best years, SN at FSL's list of achievements is still growing. Since 1999, when its founders first met, it has blossomed into a thriving organization that operates two centers - the main one in Huntington NY and an Annex just opened in East Yaphank, NY. It currently has over 100 active volunteers who offer 27 computer courses annually while they and their predecessors taught an astounding 5,000+ students in the past decade. For the Fall 2009 semester, 12 different courses will be taught in 17 separate sessions. In addition, for the first time, homebound students will be provided LIVE instruction on their home computers via internet connection. SN at FSL was named the #1 Learning Center in SeniorNet's worldwide organization receiving the 2007 Chairman Award in Excellence and it was the recipient of the Chairman 2008 Exemplary Award. After 10-years one might think that SN at FSL would be fatigued and on the decline. The opposite is of course true. The question is - Why?

HARD WORK, LUCK AND GENIUS

Most successful business owners credit their success to hard work and a lot of luck. SN at FSL is no different. Let's consider the chance happenings that spurred its success.

- Right time - 1999 was at the height of the computer explosion. The Dot Com Bubble started in 1998 and burst in 2001. Computers were everywhere and drastically changing society. The seniors who wanted in, could not locate senior-friendly training on Long Island.
- Right idea - The Family Service League (FSL) recognized the need and thought the SeniorNet model would be the way to address the problem.
- Right place - Long Island, New York has a large population of seniors and Huntington a large population of retired professionals.
- Right founders - They were a smart, capable and friendly group of people who were enthusiastic about the new organization and its mission. Through hard work and a bit of genius they developed an enduring organization that would surpass their wildest expectations.

BUILDING AN ENDURING ORGANIZATION

Surveys indicate that about 33% of all new business startups fail within the first two years and 50% within the first 5 years. A search of the internet indicated that at the 10-year mark as much as 90% will have failed. With all the problems facing a startup, the attraction and retention of quality employees is one that is critical to long-term survival. The startup owner may have had the right timing, idea, place and drive to get the business going, but without a steady stream of quality workers to sustain it, the business will inevitably fail.

If this is true for a profit-making business, it's probably doubly so for an all-volunteer, not-for profit enterprise like SeniorNet. In 1999, while the founders were trying to address the countless problems facing them, knowing it or not, they began to fashion an enduring organization and culture that would be the envy of the many books written on this very subject. These business books say that in order to have a great work environment that attracts and retains quality people, workers need to trust their leaders, enjoy their co-workers, and have pride in their particular job and general mission of the organization. This is exactly what we find today at SN at FSL.

The 36 founders were intelligent, bighearted people with infectious personalities. They were not into empire building and avoided politics. Openness and cooperation was expected then which is the norm today. To address the many problems facing their fragile startup operation, they created an organization of committees answering to the elected Co-Chairmen of the Coordination Council. In the beginning, the committees met weekly - they had to. As a result, mutual trust and long-lasting friendships developed. To most people the friendly atmosphere that arose would have been simply passed over as predictable, but it did not go unnoticed by the leadership. They grew to understand that in addition to meaningful work, people find the social aspect in volunteering equally rewarding which the founders saw as a positive force to be nurtured. They were elated when the first semester registration resulted in a line of potential students down the hallway and outside the front door. However, with the enterprise successfully underway, the need for new volunteers was foremost so they formed the first Volunteer Recruitment Committee.

In the 10-years since then, the friendly collaborative culture survives. Today many people in addition to being an instructor, coach, or office-worker, also work on a committee or two or three. The leadership promotes the congenial atmosphere by planning social get-togethers throughout the year such as luncheons and picnics. In addition, "business" meetings such as the Annual Meeting, registration Open Houses, Volunteer Training sessions and committee meetings are looked forward to by many as an excuse to be together and enjoy each other's company.

Recruitment is taken seriously - very seriously. The main recruitment source has been and still is the students. Today recruits are also solicited from Internet websites such as VolunteerMatch.com. Potential recruits are interviewed, given a facility tour and then placed in a mutually agreeable job that suits their skill set. As new volunteers are trained, meet other people and learn more about the organization, they often branch out into other roles. For the first year, the leadership monitors their progress to ensure they have a rewarding experience.

Credit for the many accomplishments since those early days 10-years ago goes to the long list of subsequent leaders who improved on what those 36 founders initiated and also to - get this - the five original founders who are still active today.

Happy 10th Birthday SeniorNet at FSL, L.I.



Top row: Nick DeFlorio, Slava Vero
Bottom row: Don Stone, Helen Morris, Eric Vero

*Nick DeFlorio is a founding member and is active as a teacher and head of the speaker's bureau.

*Slava Vero is a founding member who was the first historian and development coordinator.

Now she is co-coordinator of the Learning Center; serves on the FSL Board of Directors and SeniorNet National Chairman's Advisory council.

* Don Stone is the founding member of the membership committee and is the current chairperson.

*Helen Morris is a founding member, is active as recording secretary and formerly was the publicity committee chairperson.

*Eric Vero is the founding member of the lab coordinating team and nationalgrid Donation & Refurbishing Project coordinator.