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Blazing trails in cyberspace

By Carolyn Bickford

Cruzio: Thinking globally, acting locally

Peggy Dolgenos and Chris Neklason share a connection at Cruzio's office on Pacific Avenue.

When you want high-speed Internet that starts locally and reaches globally — but all you see is a lack of competition, innovation and neutrality among the big providers — what are you going to do? If you're Santa Cruz locals Peggy Dolgenos and Chris Neklason, you build your own network. Their company, Cruzio, provides affordable, high-speed access for about 9,000 Santa Cruz County customers as well as public Internet access, computer and business support, and voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) telephone service.

From its new hub in the former Santa Cruz Sentinel building downtown, the network will reach into rural areas that typically are not served by national Internet service providers.

"AT&T hasn't kept up. We had to create our own infrastructure," says Neklason.

"The Internet is at a turning point," adds Dolgenos. "We see a future with a lot of Internet providers, and a lot of innovation."

Dolgenos and Neklason are no strangers to blazing trails. Cruzio was among

the first Internet service providers in the country. In 1989, when the Internet was found only in universities and high-tech businesses, the couple started Cruzio with a dial-up modem and a server that resided in a spare bed-

room in their Santa Cruz home. Several years later, they moved to their current location at 903 Pacific Avenue, largely due to the fact that they could share the first T-1 (digital access) line in the area with another local Internet pioneer, Scruznet.

"We thought if everyone in the world had email, we could build world peace," laughs Dolgenos. While widespread Internet access has yet to bring about world peace, it has become a vital tool to building community, helping people work collaboratively, and enabling creative expression, according to the couple.

"We don't see ourselves as an ISP," says Neklason. "That's not a model for what we do. A better model is the railroad round-house. We facilitate the connection of people and ideas. We're really a communication

provider."

In addition to providing Internet access for as low as \$15.95 a month, Cruzio offers web site hosting (including support for streaming video), web site design, computer repair, business consulting, computer classes, public Internet access, and training. Beyond that, Cruzio has established over 40 Wi-Fi hotspots throughout Santa Cruz County.

"We've done it by working with businesses," says Dolgenos.

"Whatever's good for getting a lot of people on the Internet is good for us." Cruzio recently purchased a wireless company, Gatespeed, and intends to place even more wireless towers around the county.

Ultimately, Dolgenos and Neklason hope Cruzio will offer Internet access to the entire Monterey Bay crescent, more for the sake of uniting a community than for business expansion.

"We made a conscious decision to be local and to remain a mom-and-pop shop," says

Dolgenos. "In corporations, something gets lost in the extra levels of management."

Neklason adds: "We take personal responsibility in a way a big company doesn't. I'm one of the CEOs [of Cruzio] and I've gone up to the [Loma Prieta] mountain in an ice storm to fix our wireless tower because it doesn't seem right to send an employee up there to do it."

In September 2009, Cruzio bought the Santa Cruz Sentinel building together with non-profit organization Ecology Action and developer Joe Appenrodt, each of which will occupy 15,000 square feet. Cruzio will occupy most of the ground floor, which will make it possible to extend its current services to include a co-location data center, office rentals, and an Internet café. Currently Cruzio is in the process of laying high-speed optical fiber directly to the building.

The move into the former offices of the local newspaper strikes Dolgenos as an ideal fit for Cruzio.

"Not only does it have its own history," she says, "it was keeping the history for the community. When politicians and performers came to Santa Cruz, they would stop in to the Sentinel."

Dolgenos hopes Cruzio will become that same kind of hub — not only an Internet hub, but a communications hub, helping area residents connect and share their ideas with each other and throughout the world. ♣

Who let the cat out?



Nina Paley

Cruzio's iconic logo was created by famous indie artist Nina Paley, who roomed with Dolgenos and Neklason when she lived in Santa Cruz. The founders of Cruzio were able to use local talent; Paley received a break on rent. Like many Santa Cruz locals, Dolgenos and Neklason had a cameo in Paley's strip in the Santa Cruz Comic News.

These days, Paley lives in New York City, where she has become active in the free culture movement, which advocates the freedom to freely share and distribute creative works, such as Paley's own videos — which she shares, as you might guess, on the Internet.