

# SF NET— A Computer Bulletin Board for The Masses

By Charles Levin

In the back corner of Wayne and Jill Gregori's Noe Valley kitchen sit three computer terminals, two screens, and 32 modems. A passionate argument takes place on one of the screens.

The protagonists—Prince Romeo, Miss Anthrope, Lemming Boy, Amodeus Asmodeus, and some 10 others—are in the midst of a furious debate over the relative merits of underground "rave" parties, their comments flying across the screen at dizzying speed.

To the outside observer, their remarks seem more like cryptic gibberish than intelligible English.

But to the Gregoris, the exchange is easily decipherable. "For all the inane stuff you see there," says Wayne Gregori, "when you do see some brilliance happen, it's incredible."

Welcome to the world of SF NET, a year-and-a-half-old computer bulletin board system (BBS) that the Gregoris own and operate from their home on Noe Street. Like other bulletin boards such as Prodigy, Compuserve, or Genie, the "Net" (as it's known to its devotees) provides a forum for electronic chitchat. But unlike its more upscale counterparts, SF NET made its debut in a coffeehouse, and has earned a reputation as the "people's" board.

"SF NET is an electronic network that represents a cross section of the city," Wayne points out. "It's becoming a San Francisco institution."

In about a dozen cafes around town, java junkies can plug a couple of quarters into a terminal (you get four minutes for 25 cents), sign on-line, and begin "Netting" with compatriots. Or those with a p.c. and modem can subscribe to SFNET at a cost of \$7 a month.

Netters post their opinions on free-for-all "chat" boards and open forums, or leave their private messages in E-mail. Whereas the chat boards seem frantic and ungrounded, the forums wax serious on topics like politics, arts, culture, and the environment.

Wayne and Jill met in 1984, while working for an East Bay computer company. After five dates in three months, and a two-hour discussion in the car about "religion and kids and everything," they decided to get married. In September of 1985, a month prior to their wedding, they bought a home in Noe Valley.

The Gregoris spent the next eight years going through more career changes than most couples risk in a lifetime. For Jill, who has a degree in mass communications, this included working for sales marketing firms and MCI's public relations department.

Wayne, who has a business degree, held a variety of jobs—from unloading produce trucks and doing a stint in the merchant marine, to selling computers, to hawking commercial real estate ("kind of the dark ages of my career"), to working as a general contractor.

During his construction days, Wayne got hooked on checking out the bulletin board systems he could call up on his home computer. So after pounding nails all day, he'd usually spend the evening pounding a keyboard.

"I was going from BBS to BBS one night to see what was going on," says the 35-year-old renaissance man. "And I'd hang up if I didn't like it. I got into this one board, was on there a while, and decided to blow it off by typing G for Goodbye on the screen. All of a sudden somebody breaks open this little chat box and says, 'Hey Wayne, don't go.'" At



It's hard to believe, but SF NET owners Jill and Wayne Gregori are sitting on 32 modems, which link about a thousand callers a day to their popular electronic bulletin board. PHOTO BY CHARLES KENNARD.

first he thought it was just the computer talking, but then the message popped up again.

"I realized there was a real person on this thing," recounts Wayne. "And I went 'ahhhhhhhhh!' I'm telling you, the hair stood up on my arms. I could see what was happening here."

Soon after, he approached Jill with the idea for the Net.

"We always ultimately wanted to develop our own business," notes Jill, 32. "We were brainstorming that one weekend, and Wayne said, 'What would you think of building a computer and putting it in a public place?' I thought it was kind of crazy at first. But then I got to thinking it could work."

"It's one of those things where you try to develop a product nobody else has ever done before. This was it."

The Gregoris wanted to create an electronic bulletin board with a different philosophy. The majority of local boards were linked by one theme or hobby—which only attracted a certain set of users—and they saw this as flawed.

"That's the devastating thing that's happening in society—the idea that we only associate with people we're comfortable with and who experience life the same way we do," says Wayne.

"The BBS was this myopic extension of that naive perception in our society. It was the biggest disappointment to find that this medium of communication that got me so excited was so underutilized. It was so poorly spread out across the population that it bothered me."

"My richest life experiences have been with people from other cultures. While we watch our society come to a screeching halt with racism and everything, you start thinking, How are we going to change any of this stuff? It's through communication. It's through people talking to each other."

The first SF NET computer terminal went on-line in August of 1991, at the Brain Wash cafe in the South of Market area. And it unleashed a tidal wave of digital debating—most of it among unlikely bedfellows ranging from homeless people, to Mohawk-haired, nose-ringed, Haight Street punks, to Financial District computer geeks and Tiburon attorneys.

Most users choose outlandish names, preferring anonymity, but the Net sponsors get-togethers at local watering holes. And the Gregoris have seen a lot of "suits" sit down with "slackers," people who've netted compatibly with each

other for months, never knowing the extent of their external differences.

SF NET has expanded to 20 locations in four Bay Area counties, and now fields about 1,000 calls a day, 75 percent of them from people's homes. There are 350 paid subscribers and approximately 1,000 more people calling on a semi-regular basis.

The Gregoris have garnered media attention from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *National Public Radio*, and the TV show *Good Morning America*. Yet with little exception, netters express disappointment over the coverage, saying it portrays their world as nothing more than a pastime for punks and loafers.

"It's more than this trendy way of communication," says Aviva Rosenstein, who goes by the on-line moniker Aviva Rose. "It connects people with others whom they wouldn't have an opportunity to connect with otherwise. We tend to communicate by how people dress, where people hang out, or their given social stratum. The Net's a great equalizer."

Using the name Turbo Wench, Noe Valley architect Terri Emery netted for a year and found the experience fascinating.

"You're talking to all these people whose faces you never see, and getting to know them from a different standpoint than is typical," she says. "It's quite different than a work situation where you speak to someone on the phone many, many times, but then you actually meet them face to face. The computer is even more removed than that."

"We all tend to get a little too closed into our own private circles," Emery adds. "We see people in the street, but we never get to know their humanness, and how similar we all really are to each other. Some may have a punk style about them, but they have the same sensitivity and emotions the rest of us do."

The nearest terminal locations for Noe Valley residents are at the Muddy Waters Coffee House, 521 Valencia St. (near 16th), and at Club Coffee, at Valencia and 20th streets. But the Gregoris would like to plant a terminal in their own back yard, so to speak, and are currently searching for the right location.

"Noe Valley is the best place in San Francisco," says Wayne. "We kind of stumbled upon it when I was selling computers. It's an intellectually inclined community, an introspective community. It thinks."

Jill also praises Noe Valley's diversity, noting that it's a great place to raise a family. However, between raising their own two children—son Ben, 3, and daughter Devan, 4½—and running SF NET, she and Wayne don't have much free time for each other. But they make up for it in the most logical way—on-line.

"When Wayne's out at different cafes, he always pages me and it rings here, so I come over to the computer and we'll talk," says Jill, once known on the Net as Wee Willie Winkie. "We'll have the best conversations."

"That's our quality time," agrees Wayne. "There's something about the brevity of what you can do on here that allows you to get down to the nitty-gritty."

For those who want to converse beyond the Bay Area, SF NET has just completed a hookup to Internet, a bulletin board that facilitates E-mail throughout the world. For the price of a monthly Net subscription or a few quarters at the terminal, one can leave messages for friends in Paris or China. Other plans include a hookup to other cities in the U.S.—possibly Seattle in the near future—and an educational Net at schools, for children and teens to share their research and homework.

But mostly it's the Net's democratic appeal that draws people in—the idea that the board makes the world a little smaller and brings diverse people closer together, a Ted Turner analogy that Wayne and Jill don't dispute. In fact, the Gregoris' next pipe dream is to set up a public conference with the former Soviet Union.

"A few years from now, we'll be chartering a plane and taking all the Netters over (there)," Wayne says. "We'll go over and meet the people we've been talking with, and watch the sparks fly." □

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