



For left, Stacey Merrick, "Baby Smurf," a 17-year-old senior at Bishop O'Dowd High School enjoys "netting" at Montclair's Royal Grounds Coffee Shop. Left, husband-and-wife team, Jill and Wayne Gregori are the owners of SF Net. "Dan Quayle," below, a math teacher, won't reveal his real name. He uses the Montclair cafe's Net two or three times a week.



Cafe Computers conversation by network

Baby Smurf walks into the Royal Grounds Coffee Shop in Montclair and sits down at a computer terminal next to the long bar. After popping in a few quarters, she logs on, and in seconds, pounds away at the keyboard, participating in a dizzying conversation with 10 other people, all at once.

The late Saturday afternoon sun pours into the restaurant and creates an incredible glare on the terminal, blurring the characters as they fly across the screen. But this visual nuisance doesn't foil her conversation with Prince Romeo, who she queries about his date last night with one of her girlfriends.

As foolish as this sounds, Baby Smurf, Prince Romeo and the 10 other people on line are participating in SF Net—and they take this quite seriously. Like other computer bulletin boards (BBS) such as Prodigy, Genie or Compuserve, the "Net," as it's known to its denizens, provides electronic forums for communication (known as "netting"). However, comparisons to the upscale BBSes ends there as SF Net started in cafes and has become something of a "people's" board.

The result, say "netters," has been to unite folks from many different walks of life who might never have the chance to interact with each other. Its users start at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder with homeless people, move on through Mohawk-haired punks on Telegraph Avenue, and climb all the way up to Market Street, financial district, computer geeks. Along the way you find people like Baby Smurf, whose real name is Stacey Merrick, a 17-year-old senior at Bishop O'Dowd High School.

What started some 14 months ago with one terminal at Brain Wash, a San Francisco SOMA coffee house, has expanded to 20 cafes throughout San Francisco, San Mateo, Oakland, Berkeley and Marin. The cost is meager: 50 cents for the first eight minutes and 25 cents for an additional four minutes. SF Net installs the terminal to the cafe for free and kicks back a small percentage of the take to the restaurant. Other netters, with home computers and modems, subscribe for \$7 a month.

Netters communicate through an open "chat" table, as Smurf does, post messages on an open forum for anyone to respond to, or leave private messages

Speaking in the backyard of his Noe Valley, San Francisco apartment, his eyes widen recalling the time a Tiburon attorney, who'd been "netting" for awhile, showed up to one of their monthly gatherings in San Francisco.

Pulling up in a brand new SAAB convertible, the attorney introduced himself to Gregori and asked where the other netters were. Gregori pointed all around him to the scruffy looking crowd of homeless people, punks and slackers (the coffeehouse inhabitants who've been pegged by the media as disenfranchised twentysomethings who would rather hang out in cafes than work).

According to Gregori, the attorney looked a little startled but sat down, found some of the people he'd been netting with, and began to engage in long discussions on politics and anarchy, thoroughly enjoying himself the whole time.

To its users, this demotivating effect singles out the Net from other BBSes, making Gregori something of a "badTurner on a local level. He doesn't rebut the analogy at all.

"My richest life experiences have been with people of other cultures," says the 35-year-old Gregori, who operates the BBS with co-owner and wife Jill from their apartment kitchen. "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."

Media attention to date has disappointed many netters who say articles have only focused on it as a new forum of communication for homeless people and "down and outers."

"It's more than this trendy way of communication," says Aviva Rosenstein, who uses the handle Jorusha. Rose, when she's netting, "it connects people with others that 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 strata. It's a great equalizer."

The 27-year-old Rosenstein, who is considering doing a Ph.D on the Net's subculture, says meetings like the one

between the attorney and the homeless happen frequently. "It's good for both of them," she says in an on-line interview. "It challenges people's assumptions."

Jungle Goddess, who won't offer her real name, says that homeless and slackers only represent a fraction of the Net. "We come from all walks of life and are all ages," says the East Bay veterinary technician via e-mail. "The first person I met on the Net was a corporate lawyer living in Marin. We even went sailing once on his sailboat (not the stereotype at all). Another netite on line is Day Tripper, a Ph. D. in biochemistry who is doing DNA research at Lawrence Berkeley Labs."

'You can meet people first on the inside rather than the outside.'

ERIN GLOVER "GANDOLF"
BISHOP O'DOWD SENIOR

Rosenstein adds that the Net provides a support group for many users. When most of her friends left the Bay Area, she found new ones on-line. Another user praised the Net for helping him overcome homelessness, and drug and alcohol abuse.

If there's a down side to all this, netter "Quayle," says it reflects an increasing "compartmentalization" of society. "It's sad (because) some people are on all the time," he says. "The only interaction is from within your house. There is a lessening of face to face (contact)."

Meanwhile, Gregori has possible plans for a Net in New York that would allow users to send e-mail between the coasts. He's also talking to local corporate types for funding a schoolNet to allow elementary and secondary school students to discuss things like math and social studies.

With more than 280 people subscribing and more than 600 users altogether, the quarters keep rolling in.

And Glover is no exception. She spends all her dimes and nickels first and saves all her quarters for the Net. Although she has a computer at home, she doesn't have a modem, or else she'd use it constantly.

Today was her second visit. "I just can't stay away," she says with a grin. "I'm kind of addicted." ■