

# Club brings technology to real world

## ■ Q-C Computer Society is growing

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Almost every month, without fanfare, representatives of some of the biggest and best-known companies in the computer world send emissaries to the Quad-Cities to show off products and solicit good reviews.

In August, it was Microsoft that flew managers in from Redmond, Wash., and Minneapolis. In July, it was U.S. Robotics, the big modem maker. This week, it will be Ziff-Davis, the biggest of the computer-related publishing companies.

The attraction: One of the world's largest computer user groups, the Quad-Cities Computer Society. It's a 700-member club that counts among its members people from every segment of those companies' markets, from network administrators to retirees buying their first computers.

"Membership is down a little now," says Bob Lay, who, with his wife, Delores, founded the society's predecessor and edits its chatty, tip-filled newsletter; "It's summer. Usually we're around 800."

The society is run by a board of directors and dozens of other volunteers who routinely pull off big, 300-person meetings and presentations and help others solve complicated technical problems or just help new computer owners get comfortable with their machines.

Computer makers and software publishers rely heavily on such



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**Delores and Bob Lay are founding members of the Quad-City Computer Society, an organization of more than 700 people.**

user groups to build a market base for their products. That's why the companies are willing to spend money to send representatives to trot out products during the society's meetings at the CASI building in Davenport. "We tend to be a bridge between companies and the community," Bob Lay said.

He points out that a study a few years ago showed that, nationally, the average user group member was responsible for \$280,000 a year in product purchasing.

Even so, the Quad-Cities Computer Club remains focused on its members, not its link to computer companies.

"A lot of people think it's classes," said Delores Lay. "We

don't have classes; we have a lot of people helping other people. It's mutual exploration."

That's how it has always been, since the days right after the Lays got a computer, an Osborne 1, in 1983. Bob, who said he often spent days creating spreadsheets as he considered strategic moves in his property development and management business, wanted to get a computer to do the tedious calculations, precisely what computers were developed to do.

But operating those early machines was an exercise in frustration. "About that time, a guy was promoting the idea of getting together to figure out how to make the things work," he said. "Our

first meeting, in March, 1983, we had 10 people."

Now, through computer bulletin boards, monthly special interest group meetings, help lines and simply exchanging information, the society has become a kind of a floating computer college and support group for people who have problems with, or just questions about, any kind of computer or software.

In its most recent profile, a document it keeps updating because computer and software companies keep asking for the information, the society recites its statistics: Membership is 736, including 18 students, 344 people interested in personal and home use of computers, 373 interested in business and professional use. Most of its members use the DOS operating system, typically with the Windows interface, but some use OS/2 and Unix operating systems, Apple and Apple Macintosh computers.

Like the rest of the computer industry, though, the society has begun wondering about its future.

"Our biggest challenge for the future is to figure out how to be of use, how to justify our existence," Bob Lay said. With computer, television and telephone technology converging, most people expect computer power to be very easy to use in coming years. Most won't need a user group. "You don't see user groups for VCR's," he said.

One sign of the future: The society's spreadsheet SIG, or special interest group, quit meeting after 14 years. Spreadsheets have become easy to use.