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NABU Network an idea well ahead of its time

By Mark Sutcliffe, The Ottawa CitizenApril 25, 2009

In the early 1980s, when the coolest, most innovative device in your house was the remote control for your television, John **Kelly** imagined a future of networked home computers and he was almost exactly right.

And though the NABU Network, the revolutionary brainchild of the Ottawa entrepreneur, ultimately failed, it is still recognized as a landmark event in Canadian technology. On Friday, it was celebrated enthusiastically by the York University Computer Museum at an event where **Kelly** was the guest speaker. Two York professors have spent several years rebuilding a version of NABU and demonstrated it to the public for the first time at the gathering.

Almost 30 years ago, at a time when the personal computer was only just being introduced, when the World Wide Web was still 15 years away, **Kelly** pictured computers in the home, receiving data through a high-speed modem connected to cable television wiring, and giving users access to a network providing the latest information, games and even online banking. Sound familiar?

"NABU was a revolutionary idea," says Zbigniew Stachniak, one of the York professors who rebuilt the network. "It was the first to conceive of the computer not only in the home, but connecting to something outside the home."

The future arrived early in Ottawa when NABU launched in partnership with local cable providers and for a short time, this city was the epicentre of networked personal computing.

"It really was ahead of its time," says **Kelly**. "People used to say it was five years ahead, but it was probably 10 or 20."

In time, that became more of a liability than an asset. Pioneering is expensive work and in the advent of the PC, there weren't a lot of other players making hardware and software, so NABU had to develop everything on its own, from the computers themselves to all of the programs that would operate on them. Millions of dollars were invested in the development work of hundreds of North America's best engineers.

"The product was extremely expensive to manufacture," says **Kelly**. "Each piece of software would cost tens of thousands of dollars."

Ultimately, **Kelly** says, most consumers weren't yet ready to have computers in their homes. Many people in the technology industry weren't even sure if the home computer would take off. And investors in NABU weren't prepared to wait to find out.

"I still believe that it would have worked had our investors maintained their patience," he says. "But it was going to take a while to make it financially viable."

Kelly's vision was ultimately confirmed when cable providers (who in the 1980s were reluctant to embrace the concept) became Internet service providers. He doesn't claim to have invented the Internet (that was Al Gore, wasn't it?), but others credit NABU as one of the most innovative developments in Canadian history. In a synopsis of Friday's event at York, organizers described NABU as "the most innovative, daring and least appreciated venture" in Canadian computing and "an important forerunner of the Internet."

And even today, NABU has a following. When York decided to recreate the network, an article on PC World's website generated enthusiastic responses from former NABU users.

"We tried it free for a month," one person wrote. "But man, what a month! I still remember Dad setting it up and my brother and I playing the games!"

Stachniak says when he began to recreate the network, he was overwhelmed by the reaction of the people who worked on and used NABU during its short lifespan.

"At first, there was a total lack of access to technical literature and software," says Stachniak. "So the only sources of information were former engineers and former users. They were sending little things that they collected such as screen shots.

"The majority were kids and teenagers of the 1980s who would say, 'That was my introduction to computing. This is how I did my homework. This is how we connected to entertainment.' "

Kelly says he is proudest of the incredible work done by the team of engineers at NABU, many of whom went on to senior roles with other local technology companies.

"What a great engineering accomplishment it was, given the state of technology at the time," he says.

"The amount of engineering talent that NABU assembled was amazing," says Stachniak. "These are the people who went on to build Silicon Valley North.

"Some of them said this was one of the most exciting companies that they were working for. The atmosphere there must have been incredible."

For **Kelly**, who has been a pillar of Ottawa's technology community for 30 years, memories of NABU always provoke mixed feelings.

"You're not happy with the outcome, but you're still happy you did it," he says.

But for Friday's event, **Kelly** is very gratified.

"It's exciting to have an opportunity to revisit part of your life," **Kelly** says, "even if it's in a museum."