(Approx. 1235 words)

President’s Column

The View from the End of the Year

By Greg Skalka, President, Under the Computer Hood User Group

www.uchug.org

president (at) uchug.org

2021 was filled with ups and downs. Better in many ways than 2020, which introduced us to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also worse in some, this last year has been a deceiver. At this time last year, when COVID disrupted the holidays, there was hope that 2021 would be better. Things did improve with vaccinations and boosters, and restrictions were decreased, but new variants of the virus have demonstrated this battle may never be over.

When the pandemic first started, our group could pivot almost immediately into virtual meetings. In just two weeks, we went from Bob G’s in-person security presentation in March 2020, our last meeting at Wesley Palms, to our group’s first Zoom meeting (our March board meeting). This was not without issues, effort, and consternation. Still, we held our first virtual general meeting two weeks after that, on April 1st (April Fool’s Day!), with an APCUG Speakers Bureau presentation on 5G from Ron Brown.

Those early days of the pandemic were tough on everyone. We all had to figure out the new rules and how to cope. Our board did very well in adapting to the new normal of virtual meetings, and we held many Zoom training sessions for members to practice. Most members quickly learned how to use Zoom, but a few were not interested in virtual meetings or using that software. Fortunately, we found the online meetings opened our group up to a broader geographic audience. We welcomed members of other APCUG groups to our meetings. The virtual format benefited one particular UCHUG member who had moved out of the area but wanted to continue attending; this was now possible. Virtual meetings made sense for members with concerns about driving at night. It saved me travel time to and from meetings and the effort of lugging equipment and materials for them.

This abrupt change could easily have resulted in the demise of our group, but instead, we merely continued the slow decline in membership we had seen previously.

UCHUG’s continued existence is due to the dedication and determination of our board and the help we received from APCUG. UCHUG has been a member of APCUG, the Association of Personal Computer User Groups, for almost two decades. It is an international association of technology and computer user groups that has helped us in many ways over the years, providing presentation speakers, conferences, and organizational guidance. The help that APCUG and our Regional Advisor, Judy Taylour, provided in that first COVID year was instrumental in keeping us going. They offered the use of a paid Zoom account for our meetings, many virtual Speakers Bureau presentations, Virtual Tech Conferences, and other online workshops for our members to participate in and lots of good advice.

We held things together pretty well that first year and had a lot of participation in our meetings. The most regrettable part was that we could not hold our two annual parties, the June member picnic and our December Cheer party meeting in 2020. We just had regular Zoom meetings for both, but per our tradition, we gave away a few electronic gift cards in a drawing for members attending the December meeting.

We continued the online formula of some Speakers Bureau presentations, some instructive videos suggested by members, and one or two homegrown presentations for our meetings in 2021. The Zoom process became routine. In March, Bob G. gave us his latest security presentation through Zoom and an update for National Cybersecurity Awareness Month in October. As the vaccine became available, everyone hoped that, with enough uptake, restrictions on gatherings could be reduced, and some in-person meetings could be held. We first set our sights on the picnic.

A group of people standing around a cake

Description automatically generated with low confidenceState and local officials held us back on an in-person picnic in June. Still, restrictions on outdoor gatherings were loosened enough to allow it in July, which was better in Mission Bay weather. The group provided pizza and drinks, a few other board members brought items, and we had a good turnout. As even indoor restrictions were lifted for the fully vaccinated as case rates declined, we began planning for the possibility of an actual December meeting. Our contacts with the Seniors Group, which also met at Wesley Palms, indicated that our opportunity to meet there again may not come for a long time, if ever. Fortunately, our editor found his church in Poway would allow us to use one of their meeting rooms. On December 1, we were finally able to hold an in-person indoor meeting. It featured our member potluck and member prize giveaway, with an opportunity drawing for more prizes and an auction of donated items to raise funds for the group. We had good attendance, did better than break-even, and everyone seemed to enjoy it.

Unfortunately, the church is far from our prior meeting site, likely causing some members to skip it. Due to age, some probably were now more concerned about driving at night than before the pandemic. Some were concerned about the new Omicron variant and the likelihood of restrictions soon being reimposed and so opted out. Not long after, the state and county clamped down again. Our January 2022 meeting will once again be on Zoom.

So, where does this leave us?

I believe that 2022 is going to be a lot like 2021. The battle between new variants and vaccinations/boosters will continue. New virus variants will continue to emerge, so we can all look forward to reacquainting ourselves with the Greek alphabet. However, hopefully, vaccination rates will increase, boosters will be accepted if recommended, and COVID testing will become easier to obtain and less costly. Many folks tried (unsuccessfully) to get tested the last week ahead of the Christmas weekend, so they could more safely gather. In addition to COVID, there appear to be colds and flu circulating right now. In my extended family group, I know of one person who tested positive for COVID, while two others had similar symptoms but tested negative (all in separate households).

In some respects, I’m not too disappointed that we will have to go back to Zoom meetings, as it reduces my setup and travel time. The board has had some preliminary discussions about using the church meeting room for meetings in the future, which seems viable when health restrictions allow. The board is considering doing those as a hybrid meeting, where Zoom would be run on computers in the meeting room to broadcast to those that can’t or won’t travel in person. It will take some extra work to make sure the meeting works well for remote and local attendees, but it would give us the best of both worlds. We had a Zoom link set up at our last general meeting, and a couple of people watched for a bit, but the format of our December meeting doesn’t lend itself to remote participation. A standard meeting with presentations could work well as a hybrid meeting.

Happy 2022!

P.S. Where are our flying cars, robot maids, and space travel for everyone? When I was young, I thought we’d have these by 2022. Unfortunately, COVID and global warming are a poor trade. No matter what happens in 2022, I believe everyone will agree that 2021 was a year we won’t soon forget.