

MYKNET.ORG

MMyKnet.org is a system of personal homepages operating as a First Nations social media online environment for people living in the remote communities across Northern Ontario. MyKnet.org was developed as a community-based, not-for-profit, and community-driven service by Kuhkenah Network (K-Net), the telecommunications division of the Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) tribal council in Northwestern Ontario back in 1998.

The KO tribal council is a non-political Chiefs Council serving Deer Lake, Fort Severn, Keewaywin, McDowell Lake, North Spirit Lake and Poplar Hill First Nations. The organization is directed by the Chiefs of the member First Nations who form the Board of Directors. Through its close awareness of community needs and its team approach, the Council advises and assists its member First Nations. The Council provides services in the areas of health, education, economic development, employment assistance, legal, public works, finance and administration, and computer communications (K-Net Services). MyKnet homepages serve as a locally-supported online social network for remote communities that are members of KO/K-NET Services. The homepages are often largely youth-



driven but include elders, parents and everyone living and working in the First Nations and their family members in urban centres. To date there are over 30,000 homepages which are provided free of charge and free of advertisements. The idea came out of a need to find ways for these remote communities to communicate, interact and share information amongst each other.

MyKnet.org came about at a time when much of K-Net's broadband infrastructure was being built. This required K-Net to pursue many funding opportunities and partnerships in order to implement computer technology as a means of bridging social and technological divides. In doing so K-net realized that the communities and people they were working with faced a long list of challenges. There was the high cost of living, the scarcity of on reserve employment, the waiting lists for housing, sewage and water treatment issues, and concerns with youth having to leave home if they wanted more than a grade eight education. Add to that the medical issues with doctors who come and go frequently, the need to evacuate people with medical emergencies and the necessity to live far from home for prolonged periods when dealing with chronic illnesses. Within this environment of challenges the development of the K-Net network and the resulting increase in access to computers within the region was and

remains pivotal to the development of MyKnet. It was these circumstances which led it to become and remain focused on local education, housing, medical services, and local media. In addition K-Net has also paid attention to the development of skill sets, particularly among youth, that are necessary for MyKnet.org to operate as a possession of the community which is focused on using the network as a means of supporting local communication and community-building. As a result the MyKnet.org homepages focus heavily on local activities such as public services like telemedicine and e-learning, as well as personal social networking practices such as communications directed between families and friends. All this took much patience and many years of collaborative work.

In 1994, members of KO Tribal Council which represented seven (later to become six) remote fly-in First Nations, organized a Bulletin Board System (BBS) for their communities and in so doing K-Net was born and began a process that endeavoured to live up to its amalgamated Oji-Cree name which means "everybody's

network”. One of its earliest projects was to use the K-Net BBS to support a “Stay in School” project. As several First Nations communities only had a single public payphone or trail radios, it addressed a serious telecommunications problem by creating a link between the communities and their high-school-aged youth who attend school in far away urban environments such as Pelican Falls First Nations High School in Sioux Lookout using the BBS. At this point few communities and individuals had previous access to computers. That was the start of a long journey which saw K-Net rise to meet the challenges by continuously advancing the use of technologies and developing local infrastructure at the community level. This of course led to an increase in demand for service which they met by: establishing broadband services in remote communities, determining what servers were needed to support the social networking environment, developing the peer-to-peer social environment, developing a website platform or template, promoting the use of websites to communities, increasing bandwidth and meeting server maintenance requirements. Seven years later, patience and hard work paid off. By 2001, K-Net’s continued search for funding opportunities and partnerships resulted in their evolution into a regional Wide Area Network and Internet Service Provider and allowed them to provide high speed broadband services in four of the KO communities and to establish a shared, high-speed satellite service for its most remote community. Before the K-Net BBS was laid to rest, MyKnet.org, from its early start in 1998, came into being with its own domain name and dedicated server. So from the perseverance and dedication of K-Net arose MyKnet.org and the network of homepages it represents today. It has also become so popular that its use has spread throughout Ontario, and it has also found users in Quebec, Manitoba and across Canada.

To what use are the homepages being put? The answer to that question is as varied as the users themselves. As the distances that separate families in the region is always a factor MyKnet.org homepages often serve as a means to engage in everyday communications particularly when family members or friends go to the city to find work or attend school. MyKnet.org sometimes acts as a substitute for the telephone, or it can act like community radio allowing individual community members and particularly the youth to participate and make their voices heard. Community radio remains important as both allow the content and information available through them to be owned and created by the communities. MyKnet.org also supports connections between communities. It is not unusual for parents to use MyKnet find their children when they travel abroad, or determine where they have gone within the community. MyKnet homepages often describe day to day community life announcing such things as births, graduations, marriages, separations, and deaths as well as information on local events, local programs, associations, and sports teams. Individuals also use homepages to promote business, arts, spiritual beliefs, and teachings.

What began in 1998 as a loosely structured system of personal homepages and blogs, grew to include individuals from more than 50 remote First Nations across Northern Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and other parts of Canada who make MyKnet their virtual home. It is a home where they build bridges between youth and Elders with Elders learning from youth and youth learning from Elders allowing them to share their personal and community values. K-Net’s continued faith in the communities and individuals to do what is right and appropriate has led it to evolve MyKnet to include new services such as meeting.knet.ca a service which provides a virtual meeting place and media.knet.ca which provides the community news virtually. There has occurred the creation of homepages for formal and informal learning networks amongst communities and peers such as the First Nations Student Success Program (fnssp.knet.ca) and MoodleFN Project (moodlefn.knet.ca) which produces Moodle plug-ins for Aboriginal schools and organizations. Some individuals began using MyKnet as a marketing and promotional tool for generating individual revenue, fundraising, and financial interest in their communities.

The journey from 1994 to 2011 has not been without its challenges and issues. There has been an increase in the demand for bandwidth resulting in the need to build bigger connectivity pipes and to provide ever faster access speed accompanied by a continuous need for increased server size and growing maintenance requirements. There have been changes in funding mechanisms which have required the program to adapt so as to fit within the changing funding opportunities. There have been Government offices which tend to block access to the homepages due to amount of time staff spends visiting and communicating on them. There have been times when individuals have posted negative or not so favourable information about others, about their community or about events they attended. In some situations the community leaders wanted the unfavourable information removed. This has led to a requirement for education and information on what is appropriate to share on their sites.

Through it all patience and faith in its communities is what K-Net attributes to its success. Patience to grow a community motivated to utilize a system that created connections between individuals, between communities, between provinces and in some cases countries. It also requires a commitment to upgrade the platform, regularly, to listen to its uses and incorporate their suggestions into the platform thus ensuring that the local and regional leadership support the initiative had from the beginning continued. Support from all levels of government was also a key ingredient. This included Industry Canada’s Community Access Program and its corresponding Youth Initiative. As a result, while the rate has slowed there continues to be new accounts started and new visitors to the homepages. Many members continue to use MyKnet as their preferred means of communicating with others even after the introduction of social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook. But through all these challenges K-net has prevailed and continues to be “everybody’s network”