

Seniors beat fears of computers

Older set embraces once-intimidating Internet through free Salinas program

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A big, sometimes lonely world has become a whole lot smaller and warmer for local seniors who are solving the mystery of computer technology through a free education program from the Alliance on Aging offered at two Salinas locations.

A program called Generations on Line teaches anyone age 55 or older the basics of using a computer — from e-mail to the Internet — at no charge, using software specifically designed to simplify and clarify the process for the older generation.

The result? Seniors once terrified by the prospect of turning on a computer are now fearlessly sending and receiving e-mails — including photos — and learning to surf the Internet.

They are learning from "peer coaches" — a friendlier label than "teachers," say program organizers — who are fellow oldsters who not only are computer savvy but endlessly patient and communicative. "Sessions" — a friendlier word than "classes" — are held at Shoreline Works and Sherwood Village. Seniors can come as often as they want, stay as long as they like, and learn at their own pace.

"This is absolutely the best job I've ever had. I love coming to work," said Richard Rangel, 67, who is a peer coach. He said he gets a vicarious thrill each time he sees a senior discover something new.

"When that moment comes that they're able to send an e-mail to a loved one, or find some information online about Medicare ... that's really exciting for me, too," Rangel said. "What's fun is that they appreciate everything I'm doing, and we appreciate them. It's a trade-off."

The program, launched in December, honored its second graduating class on Thursday. One of the graduates was 59-year-old Gloria Brooks, a resident of Sherwood Village.

"I have five children and three grandchildren, and I wanted to learn how to use e-mail, forward different things, use the Internet," Brooks said. "I also love to play games online now — slot machines, arcade games, Scrabble, puzzles. I'm a fanatic."

Playing games, surfing the Internet, and the convenience of writing and sending letters without having to address and seal an envelope, apply postage, and take it to the mailbox, have mental health benefits as well.

"An idle mind is the devil's workshop, and the devil is Alzheimer's," said peer coach Barbara Wissler. "This keeps people's minds sharp, gives them a challenge, and keeps them younger."

Her new computer knowledge will enable 85-year-old Jerry Conley to connect via e-mail with a cousin in Sweden, and stay in closer touch with her two adult children, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

"The computer was so intimidating because I was allowing it to manage me," she said. "I kept thinking, 'if I don't do this just right, something bad's going to happen.' I have a computer at home just waiting for me — I haven't turned it on for months — and I'm really anxious now to get going on it."

Several husband-wife teams have enrolled in the sessions. Shirley Holly, 75, and her daughter, Rozanne Watson, 55, are taking the tutorial together.

"It took us forever to talk her into getting a cell phone," Watson said with a laugh.

"Yes, but I'm pretty good at that now," her mother shot back. "I was afraid of all the technology. Most seniors are scared to get near a computer, and I was, too. But I wanted to do this because I have eight grandkids and 14 great-grandchildren who keep promising to send me some photos, and they never do."

For Holly, her Generations on Line education is beginning with a computer-based lesson in typing — something she never knew how to do before.

Sherwood Village resident Gwen Foote, 66, said her motivation was to learn how to do Internet research.

"I wanted to be able to connect with different organizations, find out about activities that are available, research certain topics," she said. "I feel like this has really benefited my life. I can search out subjects, communicate with people all over the world, send people e-mails to let them know what's happening with me here in Salinas, and all at just the click of a button."

Angelo Posada, 72, worked on computers a decade ago when she was employed, but took the Generations on Line sessions to catch up with the technology.

"It helped me get comfortable using computers again," she said. "My nephew gave me his old computer, and it's just been sitting there, but now I can e-mail my sister in Maryland, which is pretty exciting."

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