December 11, 2009 By KAY BLOUGH Special to Newsday

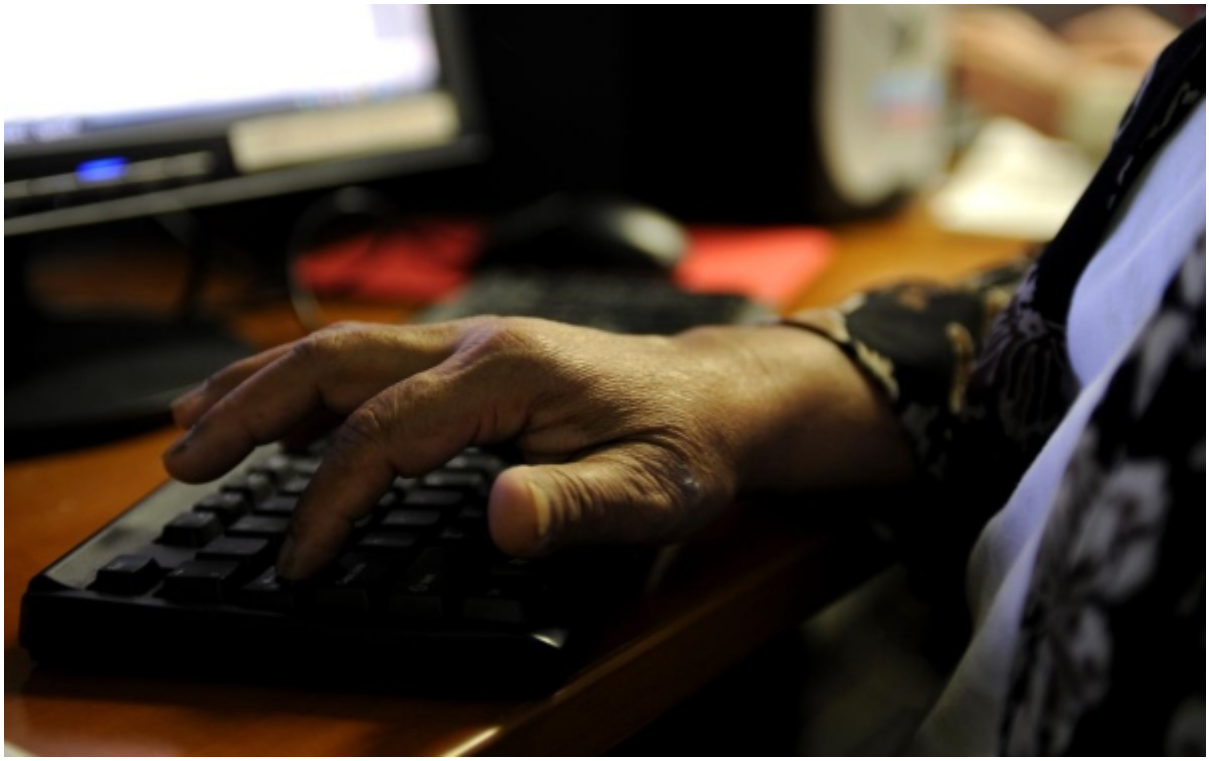


Photo credit: Newsday / Karen Wiles Stabile | It's never too late to pick up a new skill, as those who uses SeniorNet to learn how to use computers discover. (October 2009)

A good grandparent, Charles Triquet wants to answer his 11-year-old grandson's questions. "My grandson is using my computer, so I need to know it better," says Triquet, a retired fourth-grade teacher from Wantagh. "I want to answer his questions, and my wife has questions, too."

For the answers, Triquet, 78, enrolled in Introduction to Computing III, a course offered by a SeniorNet chapter in Huntington, where for $50, he and 12 others attend an eight-session course on word processing, spreadsheets and databases.

There are more than 20 courses offered by the Huntington chapter of SeniorNet that cover all levels of expertise, including intro to keyboarding, an eBay workshop, advanced Photoshop editing, genealogy, making home movies and desktop publishing.

The all-volunteer group, which recently marked its 10th anniversary, offers computer courses, training and support to anyone 50 and older.

21st century seniors

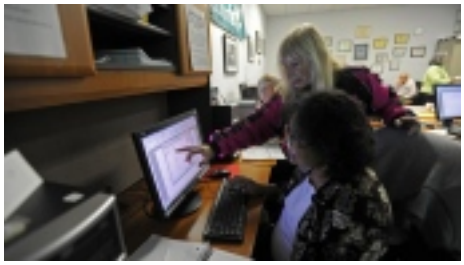
When SeniorNet first got off the ground, "We wanted to bring seniors into the 21st century," says Slava Vero, co-coordinator and one of the group's original volunteers. "Now, we want to keep them here."

Alberta Toth of Huntington, a new student at the Huntington center, said the course was good to help stretch her brain and for the support it provides. "It's nice they have these mentors," she said. "They always find you when you're in trouble."

At a recent SeniorNet class for word processing in Huntington, instructor Moss Rawn, 82, of Jericho, asked if students had their homework assignment. "Did you bring your flash drives? Anyone have trouble? No? Good."

With that, the class plunged into learning how to build a chart using a software program compatible with Microsoft's Windows XP or Vista operating systems.

Rawn, who also serves as co-coordinator, has been with SeniorNet for 91/2 years. He cracks jokes and keeps the class laughing during a training course where students use a manual he wrote, with step-by-step instructions.



Four coaches roam the classroom, helping students as needed. Volunteer Elvira Lubrano of Huntington says coaching keeps her skills current while she works on genealogy projects and learns more about digital cameras. "I just know a smidgen of everything," she says. "You learn as other people are learning."

Feeling more productive

"We want to learn what our grandchildren learn, just slower," Rawn joked. "Seriously, seniors who use computers are happier, feel more useful, and have a more productive life."

With that in mind, the center is expected to soon launch a program for homebound students that teaches them computer skills via the Internet and Skype.

Students will be able to make free long-distance audio-only phone calls from their computers via Skype, while other software connects them to an interactive training program.

Course organizer Otto Niebler and a crew of technicians conquered networking issues to allow students to work with an online coach who can take control of learners' computers remotely if they run into trouble. Students must have an active e-mail account for Niebler to install the software.

SeniorNet's Huntington chapter (631-427-3700, ext. 268 or 235, seniornethuntington.org. Click here to connect.) now has a satellite office in East Yaphank that recently offered its first courses. It also sponsors the Road Runners outreach group, which travels to events showing seniors what's available in computer training.

The group receives funding from the Town of Huntington, Suffolk County, and various grants. SeniorNet's offices in Suffolk are housed at the Family Service League in Huntington and East Yaphank.

Fees for courses vary, generally from $40 for a basic introduction to computers to $70 for an advanced Photoshop editing course.

SeniorNet is a nonprofit organization with 97 learning centers across the country, including 10 in New York. In addition to the Suffolk facilities, there's a SeniorNet center based at the Education & Assistance Corp. office in Hempstead, with satellite offices in Hicksville at the William P. Bennett Community Center and in New Hyde Park at The Bristal at North Hills (516-539-0150, ext. 130, www.eacinc.org/p-seniornet.htm. Click here to connect.).

The Huntington group began with 34 volunteers in 1999 and has served more than 5,000 students. In 2007, it won the national organization's Inaugural Chairman Award for Excellence and the Exemplary Award in 2008.

Five of the original volunteers remain active in SeniorNet: Slava Vero and her husband, Eric Vero, 84, of Northport; Don Stone, 74, of Huntington, Helen Morris, 82, of Northport, and Nick DeFlorio, 83, of Dix Hills.

In a program sponsored by National Grid, SeniorNet members with technical savvy have refurbished 6,100 of its used workplace computers, which National Grid then donates to various groups.

Another program, jokingly called The Kave because of the small room where volunteers work, donated 40 refurbished computers this spring to seniors and children through the Family Service League.

Huntington's group, staffed by many retired professionals, is one of the flagship centers, says John Alger, SeniorNet national director of operations and interim executive director. "They do so well with publicity and letting everyone know they're here, and they develop many best practices that we share."