

SeniorNet helps over-50 adults learn tech

Published: May 24, 2013 9:33 AM

By ERIN GEISMAR, Special to Newsday



Photo credit: Steve Pfost. Volunteer Diane Asser assists Zinna Etmon, of Central Islip, with her

computer during the Advanced Google class hosted by SeniorNet at the Huntington Family Service Center in Huntington. (April 29, 2013)

Reboot Camp

In a small, boxy classroom, 13 students split up into two groups, each of which is huddled around a laptop at opposite ends of the space in Huntington. Instructor Jeri Usbay, who was teaching a class on using the social networking site [Facebook](#), asked for their patience as she fiddled with the settings of one laptop. Suddenly, a xylophone-like melody filled the room. After the group on the other side of the room hit a button on their screen that said "answer call," the students broke into smiles as they saw their counterparts through the screen. For many in the group of over-50 adults in the room, it was their first experience with video chatting. One man moved his face closer to the screen and waved at it, commenting that he could use it to talk to his granddaughter.

Usbay, 59, said moments like those are one of the reasons she loves teaching seniors how to use [Facebook](#). "The smiles I see when someone discovers an old friend or finds new pictures of grandchildren is priceless," she said.

Usbay's [Facebook](#) classes are just one set of options for students at SeniorNet, a national nonprofit with a branch run in the Family Service League building in Huntington. The organization also offers classes in computer basics, word processing, photo editing, [Microsoft](#) Excel and more. To participate, seniors pay \$40 a year to become members and \$10 per course, each of which typically meets once a week for four to eight weeks.

SeniorNet also offers free seminars at libraries in [Babylon](#), [Greenlawn](#), [Hauppauge](#), [Holbrook](#) and [Northport](#), and brings its mobile learning center to Paumanok Village affordable senior housing in [Greenlawn](#) and the [Northport](#) VA Medical Center.

Teaching the courses is a dedicated group of volunteers: instructors who lead the classes and coaches who sit in on each class to help students who might fall behind. Behind the scenes are others: an executive committee that includes directors Slava Vero and [Bill Baker](#), plus other volunteers who keep the books, schedule the classes, register participants and help publicize the organization. "Everyone here is a volunteer, so everyone wants to be here," said Vero, 79, of [Northport](#). "We are like a family."

Learning about computers

In March 1999, a group of volunteers at the Family Service League identified the need for technology education for seniors. Through research, they discovered SeniorNet and decided to sponsor a branch. Vero and 39 other volunteers got the organization off the ground and opened the SeniorNet classroom that August.

At the time, society was quickly coming to rely on computers, Vero said. Participants were eager to learn the basics, including how to turn on the device. "In the '90s, people would be so excited about email because they could email their children," Vero added. The organization has evolved with the times. Basic classes are still offered, but the course selection has grown to include not only [Facebook](#) but lessons in using [Skype](#) and digital cameras.

SeniorNet is still entirely run by volunteers, which now total more than 140, including high school students in the summer. Classes for SeniorNet members are offered at the Huntington classroom, and the organization also runs a remote learning program with technology that allows instructors to access students' computers from home, and also teaches classes at an East [Yaphank](#) annex.

There is another SeniorNet operation based in [Hempstead](#) that is part of the national organization but is not affiliated with the Family Service League.

SeniorNet at Family Service League has received support from [Suffolk](#) County and the Town of Huntington and has been awarded numerous national grants. Through a joint venture with

[National Grid](#)

Foundation, SeniorNet volunteers also refurbish computers to distribute to the needy. Over the years, the support has enabled SeniorNet to teach about 11,000 students in its classroom alone. "Our mission is to teach seniors computer skills and bring them into the 21st century," Vero said. "Our world is no longer you write a letter or a note; you have to know these things."

Helps with healing

Nina Saporito, 64, of Huntington, thinks it was divine intervention that brought her and SeniorNet together in 2007. She received the group's brochure in the mail shortly after her husband had died unexpectedly from a [heart](#) attack. Though she was still grieving, Saporito thought it would be good to get out, so she signed up for four courses at once, bringing her to the center four days a week for the next eight weeks.

After completing courses in word processing, graphics, Internet and Excel, Saporito decided to become a coach and eventually advanced to become an instructor, teaching Basic Introduction to Computers 1. She also attends trade shows to spread information about SeniorNet.

As a student, Saporito said she was able to learn the skills necessary to move on with her life as a widow. Her husband, Eugene, who owned a data processing company and a rental business, had handled the bills and kept the files. After SeniorNet, Saporito was able to maintain the rental business on her own; she sold the data processing company.

On a personal level, the SeniorNet network and the feeling of accomplishment she felt as she became an instructor helped lift her out of her grief, she said. "It's very good for my self-esteem," Saporito said. "When you're dealing with grief and everything else around you stops, you do kind of feel a little bit useless. It gave me a venue to stay in the outside world rather than secluding myself, and it was a wonderful, wonderful venue for me."

Satisfaction in teaching

Usbay, of Huntington, started volunteering for SeniorNet about three years ago after retiring

from a 25-year career in the IT business. When she discovered SeniorNet, she said she felt like she was coming back home. "Technology is there to enrich your life and make your life better," Usbay said. "But it really confuses a lot of people. I get a lot of satisfaction out of showing people how to use new technology or [Facebook](#) , just to make their lives a little better."

Technology gave Jim Brick a new lease on life.

The Huntington resident had a stroke in 2004 that left his right side paralyzed. The former theater professor, flutist, actor, poet, sculptor and printmaker had never thought much of computers, but suddenly, with half of his body "like wood," he said he found himself capable of engaging in few of the things he used to enjoy.

A couple of years into a slow recovery, Brick, 67, became acquainted with SeniorNet volunteer Mike Early. Through the group, Early was able to get Brick a refurbished computer and began teaching him some computer basics. Eventually, Brick signed up for SeniorNet's remote learning program, through which he has been able to advance his computer skills without leaving his home. He compared learning the language of computers with traveling to a place where English is not spoken. "Being able to navigate through that land, it's that critical," he said. "I had no knowledge to any of the things which now are central to the way we live." He now uses the computer for personal research, email and to listen to hard-to-find Indian music, his favorite. He said SeniorNet has drastically changed his quality of life. "I can't tell you what kind of relief it was to have something to concentrate on besides a book," Brick said.

After years of therapy, he has slowly recovered some use of his right side but still uses a wheelchair to get around. "I have a second language that I now can speak," he added. "The fact that SeniorNet exists and that it continues to expand is great."

Sign me up

Volunteers are needed in the Huntington and East [Yaphank](#) centers to serve as coaches and teachers, offer technical support and to work on various committees. A volunteer application and job descriptions can be found at seniornetli.org.

Contact: SeniorNet at Family Service League, 631-427-3700 ext. 268 or ext. 235.

Article Photo Gallery

□



Tom Kim gets help from SeniorNet volunteer at the Huntington Senior Citizens Center, one of the



Volunteer Sandie Baron, standing, helps Pat Cespedes in a class on using Google and YouTube at a le



SeniorNet volunteers attend an orientation meeting in Greenlawn.



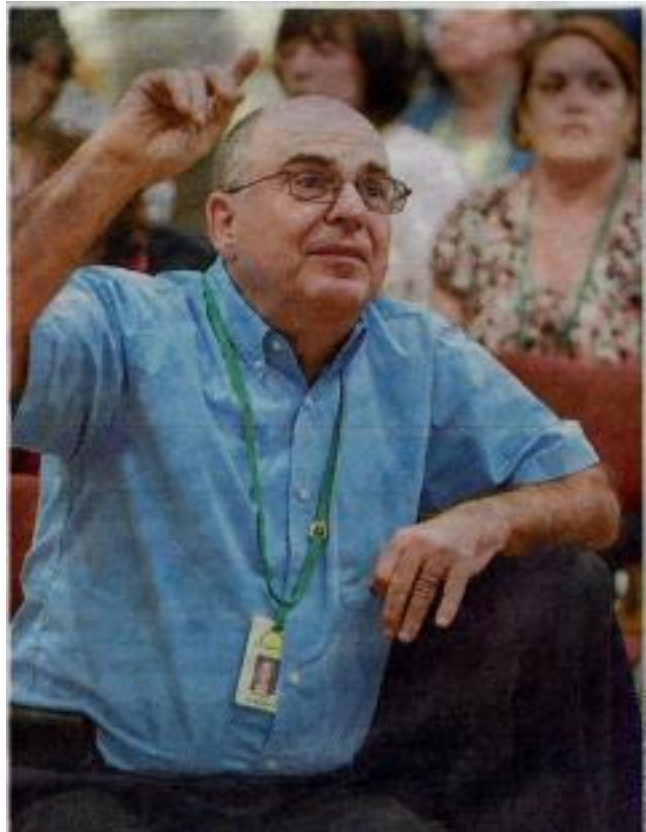
Volunteer Diane Asser assists Lew Siegel, of Melville, with his questions in the Advanced



Instructor Bernie Gershen explains items on the computer to Linda Huber, of Huntington, during the Adv



SeniorNet instructor Jeri Libby says she loves teaching seniors how to use the social networking



Nick Radesca, a retired CPA, now heads marketing and promotion for SeniorNet. "There's no one better



Nina Saporito, 64, of Huntington, has volunteered

□