Recruit the Right Tech Teachers

When computers, cellphones and websites are the subject, it’s smart for seniors to learn from students

What brought Audrey Van Buskirk-Hoge to the gleaming, new computer lab at Piscataway, New Jersey’s senior center was her desire to become tech savvy so she could communicate better with her four grandchildren.

What kept her there was the free Senior + Computer Buddy program, which pairs an older adult in need of tech training with a high school or college student turned technology teacher.

Council member Jim Bullard, a self-declared “tech novice,” helped start the computer lab program. “I wanted our seniors to be on the same page as their grandchildren,” says Bullard, who has taught Excel at the senior center.

Chor Lee, a retired telecommunications professional who teaches tai chi at the senior center, stopped up to take charge of the lab, which features more than a dozen computers with large monitor screens. Lee writes easy-to-understand training materials. Like the students and other computer lab mentors, he volunteers his time.

“Getting senior citizens and teenagers to interact is healthy for both,” says Piscataway Mayor Brian C. Wahler, who directed that the architectural design for the senior center’s 2014 renovation and expansion include space for a computer lab. “I’m confident that older adults are learning valuable computer skills while great wisdom and life lessons are being passed down to our younger residents.”

Bruno Salgado, a college student who became Van Buskirk-Hoge’s computer buddy when he was 16, agrees. “One of the biggest lessons I learned from working with seniors is patience and coming up with ways to teach so they would understand.”

Salgado has since taught code and programming games to elementary school-children. “The younger kids can’t understand high-level programming concepts, so I used what I learned from my work at the senior center, which was to teach to their level.”

Before the computer lab opened, Van Buskirk-Hoge found 21st-century tech intimidating. No more. She now knows how to access a live-stream of her granddaughter’s dance competitions. On a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon, she was able to videotape the experience and send the footage to her family.

Van Buskirk-Hoge says the students in the buddy program are “so kind and respectful. I love them to pieces.”

Learn How to Sew

Knowing how to operate a sewing machine or even thread a needle is a skill many young people don’t have, so a Maine retiree is tying up those loose ends

The Boys & Girls Club in Augusta, Maine, was looking for creative projects to engage local teenagers after school.

When Carol MacDougall, a retired nurse and active volunteer, heard that five sewing machines had been donated to the club, she wondered if the kids might want to learn to sew.

When nearly 15 teens showed interest (more boys than girls, in fact), MacDougall decided to stitch together a sewing program.

Having been sewing since age 11, when an aunt paid her 25 cents for each wool skirt she made, MacDougall had the necessary skills, but “the machines were old and missing so many parts,” she recalls. And the club had no other sewing supplies, such as fabric, scissors, needles and thread, or an iron.

MacDougall sought and received help from Augusta Age-Friendly, an AARP-related initiative that put out the word on Facebook. The posting yielded three working sewing machines. A woman who collected fabric donated some of it, and a local bank chipped in $200.

Adam, 15, got the hang of sewing in less than 10 minutes.

“I’m really good with machines,” he explains. “And working with someone older than I am is fun.” Among his creations: a red fleece blanket.

Bryan, also 15, became interested after spotting a piece of fabric decorated with the logos of wrestlers, including wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

When Bryan was younger, he helped his grandmother sew tiny sweaters and other ornaments for their Christmas tree. He loved it, and since “all my friends were joining,” he thought, “Why not learn to sew?” (Bryan later turned the wrestler into a pillowcase for his cat Lacey to sleep on.)

That’s learning from volunteers his grandparents’ age enriches the fabric of his life.

“I’ve been around longer than me and we get to learn lessons from them,” says Bryan. “Well’ll be able to show our kids and they’ll show their kids.”

For MacDougall, sewing is the project but not the point of the program: “The point is to have an intergenerational back-and-forth, of getting young and old people to help and know each other.”

Harley, 15, had never used a sewing machine before joining MacDougall’s class, which quickly led her to think about making her own clothes, along with shirts, dresses and hoodies she can sell online. She wants to make a blanket with needlepoint on it for her younger sister — that is, once she learns to needlepoint.

“For me, sewing relieves stress,” says Harley. “I tend to have a lot of free time and get bored easily.” Plus, she adds, “I really, really like it.”

The Senior + Computer Buddy program at the Piscataway Senior Center in New Jersey is free “because of local kids volunteering,” explains the center’s website.