

Program increases Internet comfort level for older adults



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Peer coach, Delores Bradley, assists other seniors as they learn to work with computers at Rose Hill Senior Center on Thursday.

By [Peggy Ussery](#)

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A.Z. Baxter enjoys reading the New York Post — his favorite newspaper from back home.

But he couldn't find the newspaper's print edition in southeast Alabama. It was one reason the 70-year-old was coaxed into the computer lab at Rose Hill Senior Adult Center. Now not only can he read his favorite newspaper, he's also taking guitar lessons via YouTube.

"I was afraid of the technology, that I couldn't do it," Baxter said. "I thought it would be too hard for me. I thought you needed a master's to master it."

Baxter found a comfortable setting to learn how to maneuver his way online thanks to a program that puts senior adults in computer training sessions. Their coaches? Other seniors.

"It has opened doors of the world to them," said Penny Rotolo of the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning Commission, which manages the program locally. "They can go any place they want."

Generations on Line is designed for older adults who have no computer experience. Through a series of sessions they learn basic Internet functions — e-mail, how to search, and how to find links to specific Web sites. They're also taught how to be safe online.

More and more older Americans are using the Internet, according to a survey by AARP. But that doesn't necessarily hold true for those age 65 and older.

The Senior Service America Inc. — a nonprofit that helps provide employment and civic opportunities for adults over the age of 55 — funded the computer training through stimulus money. Generations on Line, or GoL, is based out of Philadelphia and provides software geared toward older adults. The software is used in

1,300 facilities in 49 states and Canada. The program is used in senior centers, public libraries, retirement centers and even low-income elder housing.

Rotolo said the sessions are not classes, making them less intimidating to older adults. The self-paced sessions are offered an hour at a time. Peer coaches are trained on how to guide senior adults through the program. Generations on Line started at Rose Hill in January, and funding will take it through June.

Debbie Reed, director of Rose Hill Senior Center, said of the thousands of senior adults who have come into the computer lab over the last 10 years, at least 50 percent were initially afraid to use a computer. And just as many never step foot in the lab.

“You have a lot of seniors out there who have never touched a computer,” Reed said.

Laura Hodge-Scott worked as a lab technician before she retired. The lab had computers, but she had her own system set up to avoid them. She had a computer at home but made her husband send e-mails for her.

“I didn’t want to have to deal with them; I early retired so I wouldn’t have to deal with them,” Hodge-Scott said.

Now the 64-year-old is a peer coach for the local Generations on Line program. She’s finally overcome her fear to computers.

“I can understand the fear they have because I thought I was going to make a mistake and wouldn’t be able to fix it,” she said.

Delores Bradley, another peer coach, took computer courses at Wallace Community College after her employer went out of business. Bradley, who is enrolled in a local senior aid program to help her find employment, said it’s rewarding to use her skills to help others. The seniors want to learn as much as they can, she said.

“When they learn something, they light up,” Bradley said.

Some of the senior adults at Rose Hill simply want to stay in contact with family members by e-mail, and a few already have a little experience on a computer but want to be more comfortable when it comes to using the Internet.

“I knew how to play solitaire,” said 87-year-old Gloria Marble of Dothan. “I knew how get e-mail.”

Marble and her husband, who passed away two years ago, used to travel all the time. Now, Marble said she does her traveling over the computer. Her favorite places are the animal cameras at zoos. She recently watched baby grizzly bears play in the snow at the Bronx Zoo and a panda bear eat bamboo at the zoo in Columbus, Ohio.

“You feel you can go places and do things you never did before,” Marble said.

Generations on Line

<http://www.generationsonline.org>

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