

Sip & Swipe cafes bring seniors into cyberspace

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Robin Whittaker with one of the inexpensive tablet computers that Sip & Swipe coaches train on. (Peter J. Wasson/Ashland Daily Press)

Robin Whittaker has seen time and again the look many seniors get when they confront a computer.

“Computers?” they growl. “I don’t do those. Not interested.”

That’s unfortunate to Whittaker, the program coordinator for CORE community resources, because she has seen what can happen when a senior overcomes digital resistance and embraces new technology.

“Once they have their first video chat with a grandkid they haven’t seen in a year, a whole new world opens to them,” she said. “Think about it. If the grandkid lives in Duluth, that’s a long stretch, especially for someone in their 80s, especially in the winter. Give them a way to talk to that grandkid, and they’ll go for it.”

That’s the idea behind something called Sip & Swipe Cafes — teach seniors in an environment in which they are comfortable how to use a tablet computer or smartphone so they can become tech savvy enough to connect with their grandkids.

Sip & Swipe is the brainchild of an organization called Generations on Line, which has designed on-screen tutorials and established a training regimen to bring seniors into cyberspace. It just hit the Northland in October and already has graduated four senior learners.

Whittaker recruits and trains coaches across Ashland and Bayfield counties. Almost all are seniors themselves, because seniors tend to learn best from folks like them.

“It’s just easier to talk to someone in your age group than someone younger, who’s teaching you something you’re already intimidated by,” Whittaker said. “That’s the biggest thing, overcoming that intimidation. Peer-to-peer is good for that.”

The classes can take place anywhere — coffee shops, libraries, assisted living centers or even a learner’s home.

They cover everything from how to turn on a tablet and swipe between pages to downloading apps and creating an email account.

Whittaker has found that that is one of the first things students want to learn — how to email friends and relatives. One of the handouts students get is about the Amazon app because it can be a godsend to a senior in rural Wisconsin who can’t drive to a big city.

Photo-sharing and video chats also are high on the list because they allow seniors to connect with family.

That’s what Sip & Swipe coach Jenna Galegher, the only non-senior that Whittaker has trained, found when she worked with her first student.

“I grew up with a lot of this technology so for me it’s really easy,” she said. “But I taught my mom, when she got her first smartphone, how to use it and now we’re seeing a lot of the older generations who want to learn, too.”

Both Galegher and her student were surprised by how easy it was to learn.

“She had an Amazon Kindle (tablet), and I want to say she was 86, and it was fascinating to me how quickly she was catching on and everything,” Galagher said. “We learned how to share photos and video chat, and watch National Geographic videos online, which was a favorite of hers. It’s always fun when they are excited about it and she was super excited. One thing she really enjoyed was when she found out about talk-to-text instead of having to type everything in. At a certain age arthritis sets in and it can be a challenge to type everything.”

National Geographic documentaries and video chats with grandkids are what attract the students, but there’s another benefit to the work: The more seniors keep their brains engaged, the better equipped they are to stave off dementia.

“They can play strategy games on their tablets — Sudoku and Scrabble and things like that,” said Whittaker, who is specifically targeting seniors in rural areas, who might sit at home idle all day without online engagement.

Now that her coaches are trained, Whittaker is looking for more students — and hoping that plenty of seniors get tablets for Christmas and want some help learning how to use them.

“I would love to have too many students,” she said. “I would love to help them see the world that is waiting out there for them.”

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