

Conquer Computers With SeniorNet

By Barbara Leitenberg

If you think that computers are for kids only or for those special people who are mechanically gifted, think again. SeniorNet, a non-profit geared to teach seniors all about computers, makes it easy for people 50 and older to get personal and inexpensive instruction.

“Anyone can do it,” says Maureen O’Connell of Burlington, SeniorNet registrar and instructor. “If a six year-old can operate a computer, a sixty year-old can.”

“SeniorNet classes are easy and self-paced,” says Joan Bosley of Burlington, former SeniorNet student and current class coach. “There’s no pressure, no tests, no competition. It is a painless way to start or update your computer knowledge.”

SeniorNet in Vermont started in Essex Elementary School in 1992, with computers donated by IBM. It is one of 200 learning centers of a national non-profit organization founded "to teach computer skills to older adults in an enjoyable and friendly way." Now based in the Pines Senior Living Community in South Burlington, Vermont SeniorNet offers five to eight courses in each of five terms during the year—starting in September, November, January, March, and May. Each course is held for three hours once a week for five weeks. They also offer several three-hour one-day seminars. The fee for the courses is \$45, which includes a \$10 national fee. The fee for seminars is \$10.

Experienced volunteers teach a variety of classes, including: basic introduction, word processing, spread sheets, data processing, Windows XP, using the Internet and Email, and special programs for managing finances, doing taxes, tracing your genealogy, editing digital photos, building a web site, creating scrap books and note cards, and desk top publishing.

Constantly updating their offerings to meet the needs of students, SeniorNet Vermont has started a Computer Fundamentals class. “We found a wide range of abilities in the Introduction class,” says O’Connell. “Some people had taught themselves for a year; others had never sat down before a computer. The Fundamentals course starts out with an introduction to the mouse.” The one-day

seminars offer more advanced students ways to explore special programs, such as digital photography and scrap booking. SeniorNet instructors often contact registered students before each class starts to ascertain their computer knowledge and shape their courses accordingly.

"It's instruction by old pros," says past president Errol Beach of Shelburne. "An instructor leads the class, and a coach may sit next to you to make sure you get it. Our classes are loose, easy, and casual. And we can always use more teachers."

The roster of thirteen instructors and coaches shows people from all over Chittenden County—many of whom are retired teachers or retired from IBM or Simmonds. But you do not need teaching or technical experience to be an instructor or a coach. Bosley, retired from the telephone company, and self-taught in computers, says, "I was looking for something different." She took some word-processing classes, liked the people and the atmosphere, and volunteered as a coach. She has also served as secretary of the organization. Beach, retired as an information technology manager at IBM, had never thought of himself as a teacher. But now he relishes the challenge of figuring out how to convey computer possibilities and techniques. Although she had worked with computers as a medical researcher at the University of Vermont before retiring, O'Connell says, "I've learned more about computers as a teacher for SeniorNet. I didn't know I enjoyed teaching until I started to teach. We have a lot of fun doing it," she says. "That's what I enjoy."

The SeniorNet classroom at the Pines has twelve new computers - seven recently donated by IBM and five others newly purchased. The instructor uses one computer, and an overhead projector allows the students to see what the instructor is doing on his machine. Class size ranges from three to ten.

SeniorNet in Vermont serves about 250–300 students each year, with ages ranging from fifty-plus to eighty-something. They come from as far away as Alburgh, Shoreham, and New York State. People attend for all kinds of reasons, says Beach. Some come to make their home businesses more efficient. Some students want to improve their skills as they try to re-enter the work force. Some want to try the new electronic approaches to photography or making greeting cards. Some

grandparents take classes so they can have fun with their grandchildren. Other people just want to know what all the computer fuss is about.

For more information or to get on the SeniorNet mailing list for class announcements, write to: P.O. Box 64694, Burlington VY 05406; call 864-1502; email: mailinglist@seniornetvt.org; or go to: www.seniornetvt.org

Barbara Leitenberg writes about senior issues biweekly. For more information about services for elders, call the Champlain Valley Agency on Aging at (800) 642-5119