SENIORS TODAY

TEACHING SENIORS computer skills

By Molly Giles

"Seniors are the fastest-growing segment of computer users," says Jerry Taylor of Hilton, owner of Senior Tech, a personalized in-home computer instruction business. But senior users have unique learning needs, wants and challenges. That's why Taylor other local educators are working hard to meet them on their own ground.
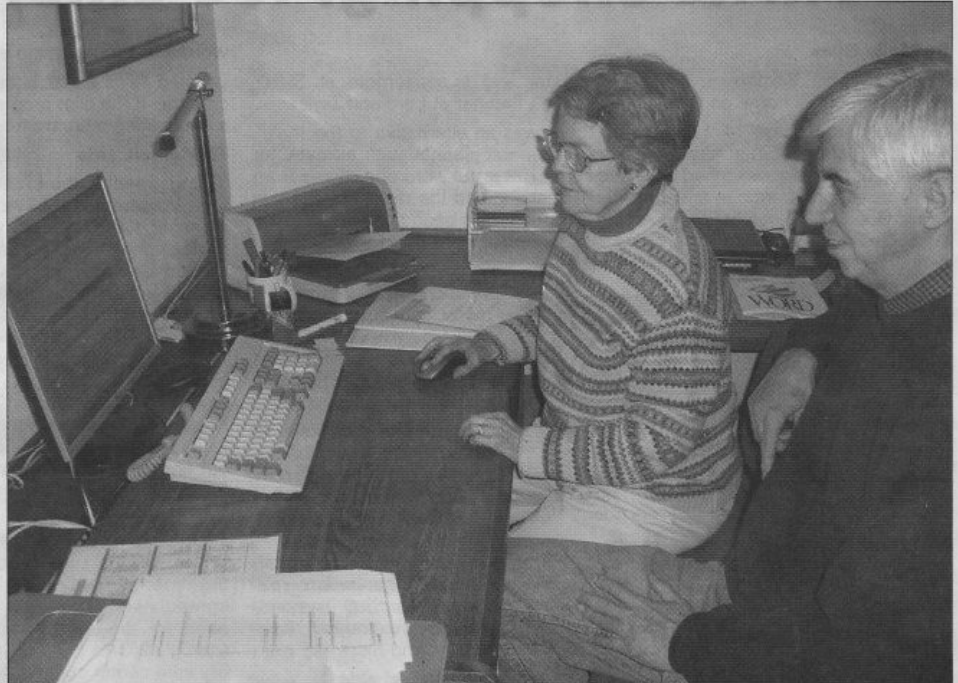
The fear factor

"Most older people are intimidated by computers," said Dick Strong, instructor with Greece Continuing Education who also teaches computer skills at OASIS, the local learning center for adults over 50. "They fear they will do something wrong that's irreversible, and they're afraid to push the keys. So I tell them to act like four-year-olds, who aren't at all afraid to push keys!"

Strong's senior students at OASIS go up to age 85. "Clicking and double clicking the mouse are common challenges," he said, "but I can teach them ways around double clicking. Keyboarding is another challenge. Many have never typed."

Because some older adults are shy about the group setting, OASIS also offers a computer tutoring format, where computer instructor and student work together one-on-one for two hours. "Some seniors will sign up for two or three sessions," said Strong, "each time working with the instructor that is available."

The three senior complaints

Given the fear factor, it's the gutsy senior who enrolls in one of the computer classes offered around town, says Jerry Taylor. But, in Taylor's many discussions with seniors, he hears of three common problems: (1) Adult education classes are often populated by non-seniors who are somewhat computer-savvy already, making seniors afraid to ask questions; (2) If the computer instructor talks fast and uses jargon, seniors will walk out frustrated, not having learned much; and (3) they become even more frustrated "when they get home and find their

Computer instructor Jerry Taylor, owner of Senior Tech, works with senior clients in their own home, at their own computer.

home computer doesn't look or behave like the one they use in class," said Taylor.

It was in answer to these gripes that in 2006 Taylor launched Senior Tech, a reasonably priced in-home computer instruction service, in which he works one-on-on with a senior client at his/her own home computer. "This way, when I walk out the door, the computer looks and behaves the same as when I sat there."

Taylor brings to the business 40 years of teaching experience, including his most recent 10 years as a Technology Integration Specialist in the Greece School District, where he taught teachers and administrators how to use their computers.

What seniors want to learn

Typically, it's "email and the internet," said both Taylor and Strong. Seniors mostly want to attach photos and open attachments, and search and find on the internet. "They may have a new digital camera and are learning how to deal with that," said Taylor.

Taylor also has senior clients doing special projects. "I'm helping one woman transfer an elaborate family history from the old Word Perfect to Microsoft Word, adding images and pictures." Two of his more sophisticated clients are developing their own websites. "I do everything," he said, "except repair computers."

For anyone trying to decide what their computer needs are, Taylor offers a list of lessons on his website, www.seniortech.us. Examples: Computer Basics, Email,

The Internet, Online Games, Medical, Finances, Travel Genealogy, Social Interaction, Photography, Computer Safety, Auctions (eBay), Buying a Computer, New Software Word Processing, Online Newspapers.

He also invites any 50+ visitor to his website to join a listserv, whereby they can network with other seniors on the internet, to exchange tips, questions, etc.

Considering learning —or teaching?

From his research into the best ways to teach seniors computer skills, Jerry Taylor offers the following tips. Keep them in mind, whether you're a senior looking for training [ask about these points] or an instructor planning to teach the older population:

- Classes FOR seniors are most successfully taught BY seniors
- Classes should be for "seniors only"
- Daytime classes (versus night) are best
- Instructor should avoid jargon and acronyms
- Instructor should be patient, move slowly and repeat a lot
- The amount of text seniors have to type should be limited
- Remember that older users may have vision, hearing and/or mobility problems.

Another great resource, per Taylor:
http://www.ewingsnet.com/documents/Presentations
/TipsonTeachingSeniors.pdf