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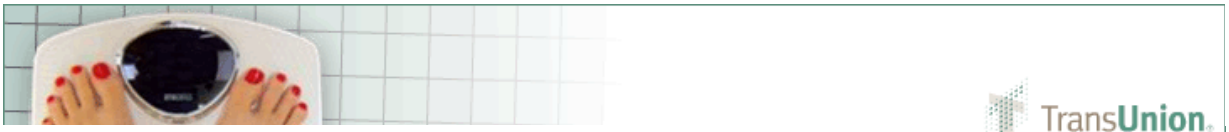

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Senior citizens carve their own niche with laptops and Facebook

They may not be "digital natives," but senior citizens find connectedness through laptops and Facebook

Barbara Rafuse says learning to use the Internet has meant staying connected like many senior citizens who know their way around laptops and Facebook.

Taylor Weidman/Staff

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By *Matt Rocheleau*, Correspondent / July 24, 2010

Framingham, Mass.

Janeen Morel does not define herself by her age, and the septuagenarian's embrace of the latest technology is an example of that approach. Her laptop links her to world and family news and entertaining games, and it jazzes up her trombone-playing skills.

For the young who never experienced a time before computers, video games, cellphones, and the Internet, technology is a way of life. But, for Ms. Morel, and more and more seniors, the gadgetry can be life-expanding.

About 38 percent of Americans ages 65 and older go online, said a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey last fall. The 55-and-older crowd is the fastest-growing age group on Facebook, increasing by 35 percent in the past six months.

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This is article is part of the cover story package for the July 26, 2010, edition of The Christian Science Monitor weekly magazine.

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"It's good to expose yourself. You have to try something new every once in a while," Morel says in a phone interview from her Des Moines, Iowa, home. A retired Iowa National Guard officer, she checks e-mail and Facebook on her laptop each morning. She occasionally plays games through Facebook apps and browses news or other sites, like YouTube. She uses software to learn new music, and gets photos of her grandchildren on her cellphone. "It's fabulous and instantaneous," she says.

For Barbara Rafuse and Barbara Adams, octogenarian residents of the Summerville at Farm Pond senior community in Framingham, Mass., learning to navigate the Web has meant "staying with the outside world and your family," says Ms. Rafuse.

Though many residents have their own computer, the center offers some equipped with Connected Living software by MyWay Village. Customized for seniors, the software's simple interface allows users to check e-mail, play games, browse the Web, listen to books and music, create a memoir, and save and share photos. Ms. Adams also uses the Web to shop, check bank statements, transfer funds, and pay bills: "About the only checks I write anymore are to family for birthdays," she says.

Residents also play video games and compete with one another in bowling on Nintendo Wii. "It's a combination of things," says Adams, including socializing, competition, and exercise.

But the best part of blending technology into their daily lives, say all three women, is connectedness.

"Does it bring [family] closer together? I think so," Morel says. Though interaction is digital, she says it has led to more in-person gatherings, easily arranged online. On Facebook, she has found and writes to people she never had written to before, such as her great-nephew, an Army helicopter pilot serving in Afghanistan: "I'm his great-aunt by marriage, and Mitch wouldn't write to me about his daily life otherwise. I wouldn't expect it; but now I get to see him [on Facebook], and it's fun for me to follow what he's doing," she says.

"Some of it's just chatter," she adds. "But it's meaningful, sure."

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'Wolf man' Doug Smith studies Yellowstone's restored predators

'Nature without wolves is not nature,' says the field biologist and project leader

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