

Helping Bridge the Digital Divide

Former ad man discovers second career teaching computer literacy to seniors who range in age from 66 to 93

By Richard Kiley

After more than two decades as a graphic designer and creative director in the advertising industry, Daniel Jones experienced an epiphany.

"I decided in the last several years that I wanted to work with seniors somehow—to contribute in some way—but I struggled with what to do and how," Jones recalls. "Then a friend of mine encouraged me to enroll in the gerontology program through Lifespan and St. John Fisher College. I loved it and I have never looked back."

While he was enrolled in the

college program, Jones discovered how he could work with seniors.

"Too often there's a major gap in knowledge when it comes to technology for so many older adults," Jones observes. "I decided I could apply my 25 years of personal and professional experience to help older adults break down the barriers of fear and intimidation when it comes to learning new technology."

After earning his certificate in gerontology through the Lifespan/St. John Fisher program and

becoming a certified Eden alternative associate, Jones spent months conducting research and learning about the challenges associated with aging.

That's when he decided to launch a business teaching basic computer skills to seniors called Daniel Teaches



One of Daniel Jones' most popular seminars — "Hip & Helpful Gadgets" — introduces a variety of fun and useful digital products available to seniors today.



(www.danielteaches.com), including courses on using and buying a computer, managing Internet security, and employing email and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. As an independent consultant and instructor, Jones provides both in-home instruction on a one-on-one basis and leads small classes at various community centers, independent living and assisted living communities in the Rochester area.

"Everyone learns differently. That's why I've made all my courses and seminars a mix of presentations, videos, live demos, and hands-on learning," Jones says. "And I purposely keep my class sizes small—no more than five or six students so I can provide hands-on attention."

"So whether my students prefer a classroom setting or in-home instruction, they'll learn the key basics to get themselves up and running with technology and have fun doing it at the same time," he added.

Research reveals need

Although some studies show the digital divide for older Americans is decreasing, it's still a big issue for seniors across the United States, according to recent research from the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

While the study revealed for the first time that more than half of Americans aged 65 or older now use the Internet or email, social networking sites accessed on the Web or through "apps" are far less popular with merely 34 percent of seniors using them at all, and only 18 percent on a typical day.

Jones said Pew's research indicating that nearly two-thirds of seniors still either don't go online at all or don't do so on most days points to the fact that older adults are missing out on and seeking a greater understanding of the technology available to them.

Seniors also are especially lagging in their adoption of Internet-enabled mobile devices such as Smartphones and tablets, Pew found.

"Pew's research shows there's still a long way to go in helping seniors bridge the digital divide," Jones

said. "Until this happens, older Americans will grow increasingly disadvantaged in an increasingly digital and mobile society."

A self-described "patient teacher of today's technology," Jones does not want to see that happen. He also points to research from the University of Alabama at Birmingham that shows older people who regularly use the Internet are less likely to suffer from depression. The study finds that regular Internet usage in retired Americans aged 50 and older reduces depression by 20 to 28 percent and helps promote mental well-being.

Breaking down barriers

After months of preparation building his curriculum, testing the model and teaching classes, Jones developed a teaching method that breaks down the barriers of fear and intimidation that so many seniors feel toward technology.

"The keys to my method are patience, passion, enthusiasm, and a true understanding of the needs of my students," Jones says.

Recently, in fact, he developed computer, Internet and digital technology pilot programs for Lifespan's Lily Café—a newly developed progressive café for older adults that is a collaboration among Lifespan, The United Way, Monroe County Office of the Aging and the YMCA. Jones also has given classes at Fairport Baptist Homes.

"Daniel's service fits perfectly into our model because we love to offer lifelong learning opportunities to our members," says Kristine Santillo, director of the Lily Café. She said the café promotes successful aging by providing an atmosphere encompassing mind, body and spirit to combat isolation and enhance community.

"We have received the best feedback from absolutely every class that Dan has given," Santillo adds.



Seen here with Ken (age 94) and his wife Inge (age 79), Daniel has found teaching this generation of adults to be the most rewarding and fulfilling experience of his career.

"Taking his courses here at the Lily Café has enabled our members to reconnect with family members, to friends, learn about social networking and be part of technology today."

Jones' students enthusiastically agree.

"I wish everyone could have a chance to learn this way. This has been like having a private tutor," says Elly Mahler, who is 84. "He was interested in where we were so he could meet our needs. I think that's the whole crux of his classes: He meets his students' needs. What more can you ask than that?"

"Daniel is extremely patient and his enthusiasm carries over. His personal enthusiasm has created our enthusiasm," says Ingle Morley, 79, who takes classes with her husband, Ken, 93. "He's taken the fear and anxiety out of using the computer. It's a new experience; it's opened up a whole new world to us."

Jones said helping his students has taken him back to one of his first loves—teaching. While living in Greenville, S.C., he taught design at the local Visual Arts Institute for a number of years. "I knew someday I would return to teaching, but little did I know that my students would be 65 and older," he says.

Jones adds thus far his youngest student is 66, while his oldest is 93.

"I have found teaching this generation of adults to be the most rewarding and fulfilling experience of my career," Jones says.