

Navigating a digital world

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Do Space

Carole and James Petersen got their first computer seven or eight years ago. But the couple, both in their early 70s, don't use it that much.

They asked their son, a 46-year-old information technology professional, for help. But he doesn't have the patience.

"He wanted to do it for us instead of taking us through it," Carole said,

So the couple tried out the *Senior Cyber Society* at Do Space at 72nd and Dodge Streets.

The group meets every Wednesday from 9 a.m. to noon. With donuts and coffee, eager senior citizens partner up with senior volunteers or other mentors to learn about specific tasks, such as texting with emojis and crafting advanced Photoshop projects.

The group is led by seniors, for seniors, said Rebecca Stavick, executive director of Do Space.

"When you're learning from your peers, you can learn about things that are important to you," she said.

The program has been running since Do Space opened in November. The Petersens met there with volunteer Carl Fosco, 68. They needed help with email. James wanted to learn what "the symbols that look like the crazy squirrels" are.

"Email is a mailbox outside your house," Fosco explained.

"We're going to walk out the door and go to the mailbox," he said, while opening the Google Chrome Web browser.

Fosco drew a diagram for the Petersens to demonstrate how the phone and computer connect to the Internet.

He said he tries to tie technological concepts to other, more tangible things, such as writing notes, sending letters, or having a Rolodex.

"It really is stuff they know, it's just packaged differently," Fosco said.

Fosco compared a search engine to the highway because it "gets you to all the places you want to go." He elaborated on the address and showed the Petersens how to minimize and maximize windows.

"We grew up with cursive language, writing (and) memorization instead of having all of this technology available at your fingertips," James said.

The event is not a class, which many volunteers stressed. There are no scheduled activities or mandatory events. It's a low-key way to meet others who want to expand or share their tech knowledge.

Most of the group's attendees are in their 60s and 70s. But some as old as 90 have attended to learn new skills.

Volunteer Sean Duffy, 60, wrote his first Fortran program in 1967 and has spent much of his life working with computers. He wants to enable people to do "extraordinary things."

He said many people who come in with their devices are afraid to touch them.

"When somebody leaves here, I want them to be empowered," he said.

Brian Sarnacki, a community learning specialist for Do Space, facilitates the group, which is designed to be welcoming and friendly.

"Technology can be a really intimidating thing," said Sarnacki, 28.

The Petersens plan to come back to the Senior Cyber Society. They'll be buying a new computer, and they'll need to learn how to use it. They'll start with the basics. But with a crew of volunteers at their disposal, they won't stop there.