

KENDALL GAZETTE

Ask Helen



Computers Open A New World To Seniors

BY HELEN SHAHAM

Q. *My father retired last year at 68 and he seems very bored. My mother has her friends and organizations, but my father just sits around all day & drives my mother crazy. I'm worried about him.*

A. Buy him a computer! Your father is the last generation which thinks "spider" when they hear "web" and "catching fish" when they hear "net." When people his age -- and even older -- get comfortable with a computer, a whole new world opens to them.

When we first built the Palace Suites three years ago, we had some thoughts that the residents might like to learn the computer. So we took an area and put in two computers and hired a part-time teacher to offer computer classes.

The "Computer Lab" didn't get much use at first, but as some residents began trying it and reporting back to others, it has become the most popular activity. About 100 of our 180 Palace Suites residents -- aged mid 70's to mid-90's -- actively take half-hour classes each week. Each resident has a private password so no one else can access their files or read their e-mails. Because of its' popularity, we now have our computer lab open 24 hours a day.

Since residents are welcome to use the computers when there are no classes going on, our lab would be overwhelmed except that so many residents have now bought computers for their apartments. We were proactive enough to wire the building so that each apartment has Internet access (included in the monthly rental fee), but we never expected there would be so much demand. With basic computers now available for around \$500 and printers for \$100, any resident can afford their own.

David Padron is the young man who teaches the classes at The Palace Suites. He has been adopted by the residents as the "grandchild who actually shows up and visits every week." David teaches them new things every week, and then they go up to their apartment and practice what he teaches. He is full-time here now. He helps residents set up the computers in their apartments, and occasionally goes up to help them when something goes wrong.

"The first thing to teach people is that no matter what button they push, they can't break the computer," says David. "They're very afraid at first, but they pick it up easily. The Internet is a very scary thing, but once they learn the basics of navigation their whole world changes."

More than anything, says David, the residents use the computers to stay in touch with family, receiving messages and pictures of children and grandchildren and printing them out. David has convinced me to buy him a digital camera so he can take pictures of the residents that they can send to family members in return.

"Many also keep track of their portfolios on-line. That's a very popular activity," David says. One resident has even progressed to the point where she is producing newsletters for her organization.

"They play solitaire and other games, explore the websites of their children's businesses, look up their family tree and visit family websites, send e-mail jokes, research subjects of interest, and generally have a good time," he said. "Some of them were secretaries in their younger days, and they still type well, even faster than I do."

If you or perhaps one of your teenage children want to take the time to teach Dad the computer, that will be a wonderful bonding experience for you. If not, hire someone like David to come in once or twice a week to teach your father the basics. Once he sees the potential, he will be hooked.

All of us get mesmerized by the Internet. It's addictive, isn't it? We begin to explore one area, and one website leads us to another, and we can spend hours and hours learning new things, until finally we have to quit so we can get back to our jobs and our lives. Wouldn't it be nice to be retired and have all the time we want to "Surf the Net"?

Helen Shaham and her husband Jacob have been operating retirement communities for nearly 30 years. The Palace Suites in Kendall is a luxury Independent Living Community for active seniors. In addition, The Palace at Kendall campus is home to two Assisted Living Residences and a Nursing & Rehab Center. They also operate The Palace Gardens Assisted Living Community in Homestead, Homestead Manor Nursing Home and The Palace @ Home, a Medicare Certified Home Health Agency. Their two newest projects are The Palace at Weston -- luxury living for those 55 and over; and The Palace Tel-Aviv, a continuing care retirement community in Israel. They have two communities under development -- The Palace at Weston Senior Living and The Palace at Coral Gables. More information can be found on the company website, www.thepalace.org or by calling 305-270-7000.