

From iPhone photography to memoir writing, older adults learn new skills

By Peggy Spear

The Zoom screen is full — 24 participants — but one gentleman was having trouble lowering his hand, Zoom-style.

Immediately several participants gave him advice, but ultimately, it was the man himself with a little bit of experimenting, who figured out which button to push on his screen.

The class was taught by the San Antonio branch of Senior Planet, based in Silicon Valley. It was an introduction to YouTube, and the instructor's first wise words are something we can all take to heart: "Learn like a child. Just keep exploring," he said, as he taught the basics of the video sharing platform, from what it was, to how to upload your own videos, create a channel and explore everything else in the YouTube world, from travel to motorcycle meditations.

Most people have had some Zoom or other computer experience since the pandemic made us all more reliant on technical devices, and groups like Palo Alto's Senior Planet are teaching older adults some of the programs and applications that can help them keep up in an increasingly fast-paced world.

San Francisco's Community Living Campaign is also giving out tech advice and classes, and grants have even enabled it to give out tablets to people in underserved communities throughout the city.

Across the bay, at Alameda's Frank Bette Center for the Arts, many older people are discovering — and rediscovering — other, not so technical pursuits, like



AMY PATICK

Above: Amy Patick used her iPhone to take pictures of a landscape in Iceland. She teaches iPhone Photography 101 at the Frank Bette Center for the Arts in Alameda. Below: Marina Lazzara, in the top left, leads her "Writing for Remembering" memoir class, which is currently on Zoom.

Details

Senior Planet: www.seniorplanet.org/locations/palo-alto

Community Living Campaign: www.sfcommunityliving.org

Bay Language Academy: 1325 High St., Alameda, 510-306-4229, www.baylanguages.com

Frank Bette Center for the Arts: 1601 Paru St., Alameda, 510-523-6957, www.frankbettecenter.org

painting and photography.

And perhaps one of the most important skills for cognitive health, learning a new language, is available at such places as local senior centers and Alameda's Bay Language Academy.

No, it's not too late to learn like a child. More students are underscoring the importance of learning new skills, for fun, cognitive

improvement, and in some cases, for profit.

"At the Community Living Campaign, we are dedicated to enhancing neighborhoods, and one of the best ways to do that is through classes, from tech to cooking to dance parties," said Patti Spaniak of the Community Living Campaign. "The neighborhoods in San Francisco



MARINA LAZZARA

have such different flavors, and we see too much isolation in older adults. We are dedicated to helping older adults age in place and avoid isolation."

One of their classes is "Writing for Remembering," taught by Marina Lazzara, who has a master's degree in poetry and a strong desire to keep older adults connected to each other and their own pasts.

While there are several other popular memoir writing workshops offered through Community Living Campaign, Lazzara's is somewhat fast-paced. She gives the students a prompt, then 12 minutes to write a few paragraphs about it. Then a brave volunteer or two reads their writing in class, and it is discussed, often prompting lively discussions.

The class was held on Zoom during the pandemic and Lazzara hopes to be back in person soon, or in a hybrid capacity, so some of her East Bay students can attend.

In fact, the class has been so successful that Lazzara is putting the final touches on a book of the published memoirs.

"Everything in life is a prompt," she said. "If you don't think you have something to say, you're wrong."

Speaking of something to say, Essia Bouzamondo-

Bernstein encourages expressing it — in as many languages as possible. The founder of Alameda-based Bay Language Academy likes to mix the ages in her classes, feeling like people can learn different things from other generations.

"It is so enriching to teach 20-year-olds up to 80-year-olds," she said. "Our oldest student is 83."

She stresses that learning a new language sparks neurological connections in the brain and improves cognitive abilities. She said she should know — she's a former cognitive scientist herself.

"We live in a beautiful melting pot here," she said. "I started teaching my native French, but have since branched out to other languages, including Italian, Russian Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese. Mandarin and Cantonese are very different, but most Americans don't realize it."

She is slowly easing back in to in-person classes, but still offers online classes as well.

"Like learning a different culture, I have to be mindful of our changing social needs," Bouzamondo-Bernstein said.

When it comes to art, no one who owns a cellular telephone realizes quite what they hold in their hand. Sure, it's a small computer,

but it is also eyes to the world. Or so says award-winning iPhone photographer Amy Patick, who teaches at the Frank Bette Center for the Arts.

"While this class isn't specifically for older adults, we have many retirees who are interested in learning more about what they can accomplish with their phones," she said.

She developed a curriculum, iPhone Photography 101, and has seen the results develop into something even she couldn't have imagined.

She gives her students a half-hour assignment to go out and take pictures, then the magic really happens.

"I teach them how to do simple editing, work with filters, give a photo a different artistic flair," she said. "When we were growing up, we had to make sure every picture was perfect. Now, I teach that every picture you take, edit it. We show one or two photos on a screen, and I show how easy it is to make it their own artistic masterpiece."

There have been some bumps along the road, like one student who couldn't "swipe" at all.

"That was challenging. I realized a lot of older adults either press too hard or too soft. ... It's just gaining muscle memory," Patick said.

Some of her students have learned so well and have been confident enough to enter some of their more artistic iPhone photos in photography contests, as well as sell their art.

"They are amazed that they can do that with just an iPhone," Patick said with pride.

It's a similar sense of pride that artist Emily Weil feels when she sees the results of her "non-traditional" painting classes, also offered through the Bette Center. Her students range from those with an artistic background to older adults who want to develop a new hobby.

"I want people to 'color outside the lines' a little," Weil said. "Many people come in with a little experience and thinks there is only one way to paint watercolors. I try to teach them to be a little less rigid, not to try so hard, to have fun. ... My goal is to have people tap into what's inside of them, their creative center."

Weil notices the younger people have more of a drive to produce something, but that some of the older adults in her classes welcome the opportunity to be a little more daring in their approach.

"We emphasize the process, not the result," she said. "As we grow older, I think we give ourselves more permission to part ways with the 'right' way to do things."

Weil has found her older students are open and more relaxed, just loving to learn.

"It's a great energy to be around," she said.

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