

Social media offers connection, escape

By Peggy Spear

If you're a TikTok user, you are familiar with the Dancing Grandmas. But even if you've never logged on to that particular social media site, these ladies of a certain age may be making their moves across local and nation news channels alike.

A trio of older women from Winnipeg, Canada, became overnight TikTok sensations after creating videos to make their grandkids laugh.

According to CBS News, in September, 74-year-old Lois Kreuzer and her sisters, Donna Emes and Wendy Dreger danced to the 1962 hit song "The Loco-Motion" by Little Eva and posted it to the account @oldlady152. That video now has five million views on TikTok and counting.

Meanwhile, in Fort Myers, Fla., 93-year-old grandma Marie Frances O'Brien, known as "Fran" or "Fran the Hip Gram" on TikTok, is dancing her way into the heart of millions online. At the age of 15, she would perform in shows for WWII servicemen and she told a Fort Myers newspaper she has been dancing ever since. This time, it was to cheer up her daughter, who was undergoing treatment for lymphoma.

These dancing queens may epitomize the new world of social media, at least for aging baby boomers and the Greatest Generation, who may not have touched a computer until mid-life. While TikTok may remain the bastion of younger folks, connecting on Facebook is one of the most popular pastimes for older adults.

"Older adults turn to social media for the same reason that every adult does, because it's engaging, informative and social," said Suzanne Myklebust, a spokesperson for Senior Planet and Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), sponsored by

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AARP. "It's also an easily accessible way to stay in touch with loved ones, which has been significant as the pandemic has forced so many older adults to be locked down for months at a time."

According to the Pew Research Center, as more Americans have adopted social media, the social media user base has also grown more representative of the broader population. Young adults were among the earliest social media users and continue to use these sites at high levels, but usage by older adults has increased in recent years. In fact, about seven in 10 older adults 70 and older, have clicked with social media.

According to the Pew study, Facebook and YouTube are the most popular platforms, with Instagram and Pinterest gaining in popularity.

And as the Dancing Grandmas have proved, even TikTok has spiked some older adults' interest.

"I watch it for the videos, it's fun," said 63-year-old grandma Suzanne Soberanes of Walnut Creek. She admits she likes to stay in tune with what her granddaughters are doing. "I like the funny stuff, and the dances."

But Soberanes, like fellow Walnut Creek resident Sanjiv Chawla, 68, primarily uses Facebook to keep in touch with



SENIOR PLANET

The Senior Planet Exploration Center in Palo Alto and most senior centers in the Bay Area offer computer training classes. Currently, the Senior Planet classes are offered online only.

family members. They have both also joined Instagram for the same reason. Even Chawla's 93-year-old mother Pushpa, who lives in India, uses Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, a messaging app often used for international communication. He said Pushpa also takes her internet usage even further, learning about and teaching herself about art.

"She is truly amazing," Chawla said.

But both Soberanes and Chawla have the same concerns about social media that many people do: the plethora of disinformation that Facebook, Instagram and other social media sites have faced.

"When it's used right, it's great to connect with people," Soberanes said. "But when it's used in ways to influence people to believe things are not true, and create unrest ... it's very negative."

Chawla agreed. "There are lot of conspiracy theories and news that is not from proper sources," he said.

Also, young children should be monitored for how much time they spend online.

"I worry about my grandkids being bullied on social media," he confessed.

One other issue is the learning curve. Using computers is not intrinsic to older adults and as it has been for millennials and Gen Z.

Soberanes, 63, who joined Facebook six-to-seven years ago, mainly taught herself how to use the app, but she did have help from her daughter and granddaughters. She picked it up easily and is now mastering Instagram.

And let's not forget the millions of older adults who learned Zoom, Google Meet and other conferencing applications, to stay in touch with family, friends and telehealth medical providers during the heart of the pandemic, and even now.

Still, Myklebust is wary of older adults relying on kids and grandkids to train them to the level of computer and smartphone use and interaction that may be the new normal.

"Traditionally, older adults have learned from their family, friends and grandchildren, but we see this as an unsustainable process," Myklebust said.

Teaching someone about something they know little to nothing about can take a tremendous amount of time and patience — something a lot of teens don't have, she said.

"A long and arduous process like that can lead to feelings of frustration, causing people to drop whatever they're learning, never return to it and leaving a bad taste in their mouths," she said. "That frustration can also lead to unnecessary tension between loved ones."

That's why organizations like Senior Planet and other senior learning websites like AARP exist, Myklebust said. Also, many to most senior centers in the Bay Area offer some sort of computer training.

"As an organization, we're not only making this a learning process that's efficient and effective but one that's also fun and interactive," she said.

And who knows. Although Soberanes said she likes social media to stay current, watch funny videos on TikTok, enjoy Pinterest and get together for Happy Hours with her friends on Zoom, she may be the next Dancing Grandma. Stay tuned!

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