

Seniors receive computer lessons, respect

By Kim Zarzour

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Sophie Tanel can't help but laugh when she thinks about the scene at Thornlea Secondary School this spring when she joined other seniors in the classroom to learn about social media from students.

"These kids are there and they don't know our brain cells are turning to mush and they're rattling off 'do-this-then-do-that-then-do-this...' and we're all sitting with our mouths hanging open, like we've got no clue. They must have thought, 'what is the matter with these people? Are they a bunch of old farts, all out to lunch?'"

There wasn't anything the matter, of course. They just needed to work at a slower pace than the machine-gun chatter young people are used to, and once they got that part figured out, the session went swimmingly.

The seniors left the four-week project smarter about technology; the juniors left smarter about their elders.

It all went so well, in fact, that this pilot project, pairing media-savvy teens with media-curious seniors, is set to be rolled out at schools across the country.

The high-tech project had its beginnings in a very low-tech setting: a native ceremonial powwow.

Sandra Finkelstein, a Thornhill mom and life coach with 2BEmpowered, accompanied her children at a traditional event held by the Native Child and Family Services of Toronto last July.

She recalls seeing a big white tent on the grounds with a sign: "Elders Only".

Older people are considered sacred and treated with great respect in native culture, she learned. Everything during the powwow event was free for the elders, and the participants catered to them to show how much they value their wisdom.

She contrasted that with her own children's upbringing in a society that values youth culture, in a world where Bieber and Gaga — not Grampa and Gramma — are placed on a pedestal.

Native culture, she thought, had it right.

"That's how we should do it. But we let the older generation slide, we don't tap into their wisdom."

When she got home, she wrote to Moses Znaimer, executive director of Canadian Association of Retired



Senior computing skills. Thornlea Secondary students are getting credit for helping seniors learn social media skills. The program will soon roll out nationally. Right to left are Karma Scapillato, Ramtin Najafi, Terence Wong, Heather Jones, Graham Warren, Stefania Lamanna, Mohammed Jamily. The seniors, below left, are Sophie and Renzo Tanel.

Persons (CARP), suggesting a mentoring program linking young with old.

What developed was a trial project pairing students from the alternative program at Thornlea Secondary School with local CARP members. The students were tasked with developing a curriculum based on the seniors' needs, and in turn, they earned volunteer points that would count towards the 40 community service hours they require before graduating.

Seniors learned about Twitter, Facebook, Skype and Youtube's how-to videos. Students learned, too.

"They shared stories with us. One man went through World War II," said Grade 12 student Terence Wong. "We found out how life is actually out there in the world."

"We had a ball. The kids all had a great sense of humour," said Ms Tanel, a Maple resident. "The chemistry was wonderful. We're so sad it's over. No one wanted to leave the class."

That kind of response, and interest from other seniors across the country, convinced Ross Mayot, CARP's vice president of community development, that the project should go national.

"We're big on inter-generational connections," he says, adding CARP is looking at a "companion program" that would tap into expertise and professional backgrounds of seniors who can advise students preparing to graduate about resume-preparation and role-playing job interviews.

The Thornlea students, enrolled in alternate education, got an added boost.

"These are students who tend not to be the academic high achievers and they don't always have the chance to be the stars," Mr. Mayot said. "It was a chance to turn the tables, to let them be the ones with the knowledge and sharing and guiding others."

Stefania Lamanna remembers being nervous at first. "I'd never taught anyone in front of the class before. Plus, they were older than me. What if I said something wrong?"

In the end, she said, the students and seniors became friends and the Grade 12 student decided this is what she wants to do with her future.

Terence Wong, 18, signed on for the community hours, but left with a better understanding of his own grandmother.

He'd tried teaching her how to use the computer so they could keep in touch when he left her behind in Malaysia, but her slower pace, along with language issues, made it frustrating for both of them.

After working a while with Sophie Tanel, he told her she had taught him something about his grandmother.

"I learned it's not her, it's me," he told her, and he now understood how to connect with her.

"It was like a light bulb went on," Ms Tanel recalls. "That moment made it for me. It was such a great feeling. We're at opposite ends of the spectrum but we have so much to learn from each other."