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Increasing number of seniors using the Web

BY LAURA FIGUEROA

Golden haired Bella Larson, 81, fancied herself more of an old-fashioned letter writer. She preferred putting pen to paper when it came to writing her grandchildren or dashing off letters to local publications.

Then Larson's children surprised her with a computer, and she knew it was time to master the machine and learn the intricacies of distinguishing a right click from a left click of the mouse.

"It looks simple enough, until you try to teach yourself," Larson said with a laugh.

Joining the growing ranks of seniors who are getting plugged into the Internet, Larson enrolled in a beginners computer course at Pembroke Pines' Southwest Focal Point Senior Center.

A recent study by the Pew Research Study shows that the numbers of seniors age 70 to 75 using the Internet has nearly doubled since 2005. In a December survey, nearly 45 percent of respondents said they were active on the Internet, compared to 26 percent in 2005.

To reflect the growing interest from seniors yearning for tech-saavy status, several South Florida cities are beginning to increase and expand their senior computer and Internet courses.

"From the baby boomers that have just retired and are active in the community to the 90-year-old who has never touched a computer, there is this wide mix of seniors who want to learn to e-mail their family and loved ones," said Anastasia Smith, senior recreation specialist for Coral Gables.

A year ago, Coral Gables started using laptops to teach seniors, and now Smith is faced with seniors eagerly asking when the next level of courses will be offered.

At Miami's Antonio Maceo Park, a group of *abuelitas* and *abuelitos* pass around little cups of *cafecito* as they learn the fundamentals of double-clicking or -- as some there like to put it -- performing "*un click-click*."

"Now I can see why the young kids can stay on here for hours," said Augusto Fina, 79, as he browsed the Web. "I start reading one article, then the next, then I click on something else for more information. There's just endless information."

While many are turning to the courses to help stay linked in to the world, others, like Irene Batlle, 80, contend the courses help keep them young at heart and healthier.

"They say that this helps combat Alzheimer's because you're using your mind more," said Batlle, who has attended the courses at Maceo Park for more than a year.

In Hollywood, the city's "Senior Net" computer training program is so popular that there is always a waiting list to get into the classes.

"It's the modern age, and a lot of seniors are realizing they need to be equipped for a society that functions

on computers," said Eric Brown, recreation supervisor for Hollywood's parks department. ``They go to banks, they go to grocery stores, and they see that computers are the way of the world."

The demand for computer-friendly courses means cities have also started to reconfigure their course offerings. In Miramar, the opening of the city's new Multi-Service Complex prompted officials to rethink the type of senior course offerings to include not just arts and crafts but also computer classes.

"Technology is advancing and everyone has to advance with it," said Joyce Donaldson, operations manager for Miramar. ``Seniors deserve that chance just like everyone else."

While the Pew study found that e-mailing was the most popular online activity for seniors, websites catering to the over-65 crowd continue to sprout up. Popular dating site eHarmony offers to match you with your "senior soulmate," and online publications offer the option of larger fonts for older readers.

Besides teaching students the fundamentals of the computer, instructors must now also school seniors on Internet scams and the unwritten rules of joining social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace.

At Maceo Park, instructor Valerie Mohammed, a 22-year-old college student, wonders if her senior students are prepared to enter the online social networking scene.

"I don't know if they'll understand what getting `poked' means," Mohammed said. It's a common online term for being nudged.