

## Perfect Pairing: Young People Teaching Seniors About Technology by DENNIS TAYLOR

Featured photo: Sean Butler, 16-year-old sophomore at Carmel (Calif) High School, mentors Judy Dudley on how to use her smart phone. Photo by Dennis Taylor

CARMEL, CALIFORNIA- Seniors who feel like today's technology has left them in the dust are hitching a ride with a philanthropic gaggle of students who, in their spare time, are helping older generations return to the fast lane with their iPods, iPads, smart phones and computers.

A group of teenagers who never knew a world before computers launched Wired for Connections/Mentor Up, a club at Carmel High School in California, designed to help senior citizens understand the basics of modern-day devices and bridge part of what they perceive as the intergenerational divide.

Sean Butler, a 16-year-old sophomore, initiated the program two years ago, offering to share his tech knowledge in 45-minute, one-on-one mentoring sessions with members of the nearby Carmel Foundation, a membership organization for people 55 and older dedicated to facilitating successful aging by providing a broad spectrum of interactive activities and services. The sessions are provided free to member of the Foundation, which was founded in 1950 and now has more than 3,000 members.

Carly Rudiger, 17, a junior at Carmel High in California, teaches Jenifer Bovey, 69, how to use her iPad. Photo by Dennis Taylor

Carly Rudiger, a 17-year-old junior, joined Butler at the beginning of this school year and took his concept to another level, creating a full-fledged club at Carmel High. The pair oversees a group of about 15 classmates who, in exchange for community service credits, volunteer regularly to share what they know with any member who signs up. The waiting list has close to 50 names.

"I was probably 5 years old the first time I sat down at a computer," Butler said. "It didn't take me long to start figuring things out because I wasn't afraid to play. It's easier to learn technology if you're not afraid of it and what holds a lot of older people back is that they're afraid they're going to mess something up if they play around and experiment. They don't realize that most of the time you can just undo what you just did and get back to the place that you want to be."

Seniors register for the classes (usually held on Saturdays), bring their device, an iPhone, Android, iPad, laptop or virtually anything else they'd like to learn more about, and receive hands-on instruction from their young mentors.

"I don't come with my own agenda," Rudiger said. "They ask me questions how to do this or that and I try to help them understand as many of those things as possible during our 45-minute session. I try not to overwhelm them with too much information because they can come back for as many sessions as they want."

Before entering the mentoring program, the Carmel High contingent goes through "sensitivity training," which, among other things, includes activities designed to help them better understand their aging pupils.

"One thing we did, for example, was smear a pair of glasses with Vaseline, so we could get an idea of what it might be like to have the kind of vision problems that some older adults live with every day," Rudiger said. "We also taped fingers together and put tape over fingertips to try to replicate problems they might have with their hands. It can be frustrating to watch how slowly some of them are when they try to type, but the sensitivity training taught us that typing can be very difficult if your fingertips are numb."

The graying "students" say they tend to learn much more during one-on-one instruction than they do in group classes they have tried. The fresh-faced "mentors" engage with a generation of people they barely knew before.

"I mentored a 93-year-old guy one day who started telling me about a Jewish kid he knew back in high school, right before World War II," Butler recounted. "I guess the kid got bullied a lot and this man used to protect him."

"I helped him find an article about his old friend online, and his reaction was really cool. It was pretty amazing for him to discover what his old friend became, and that made it exciting for me. We even found an email address so he could reconnect with his friend after all these years, which made him very happy."

Carole Bestor, a 69-year-old hairdresser from Pacific Grove, received an iPad from her husband as a gift, but never used it until she sat down with Rudiger for a pair of 45-minute sessions. Her eyes widened and sparkled as her mentor helped her discover the possibilities of the device.

"It was really exciting to learn how to use email. I've always been a person who sends a letter or a card through the mail, but now I can email my daughter and also my girlfriend, who I went to high school with," she said. "But I think the most exciting thing I learned about was Pandora, a place on the Internet where I can listen to music by anybody I like. I listened to Adele and Jennifer Lopez today."

Rudiger helped Bestor discover that her tablet has a camera and showed her how to use it. Together, they took a selfie. Bestor, an artist, then learned how to surf the Internet to find hundreds of photos of Monet's garden in Paris, something she has longed to see all her life.

Judy Dudley, who declined to give her age, used part of her 45-minute session with Parker to get acquainted with "Siri," the Apple Corporation's "intelligent personal assistant and knowledge navigator" that uses a natural language user interface to answer questions, make recommendations, and perform other tasks by delegating requests to a set of Internet services. "Siri" (a Norwegian name meaning "beautiful woman who leads you to victory") answers commands from a smart phone in a female voice.

"It's amazing," Dudley said. "I just got this (application), and my granddaughter showed me a little bit about it, but she told me I was going to need a lot of help. I took a class at the Apple Store, but it was very confusing. Then I found out I could come here. These kids who are mentoring us are much smarter than we are about this stuff. None of this is natural to me, but Sean grew up knowing it, and he's taking me step-by-step, telling me exactly what to do, making it all very easy."

Carmel resident Ellyn Gelson, 69, and her 79-year-old friend, Bill Roulette of Woodland Hills, brought a higher level of tech savvy into the same session (she has owned a computer since 1997 and once had a Palm Pilot; he still uses the first-generation iPad), but got a worthwhile education from Butler and 17-year-old Carmel High senior Caroline Lahti.

"I learned a lot of things today that I didn't know before," Roulette said. "I discovered how to access the app store, and how to maneuver around the different applications. I found out how to get rid of stuff I don't want anymore. And these kids taught me how to use my iPad to email photos and also to Skype. I never realized I could do those things."

The teenage mentors are two-time recipients of a \$1,000 grant from the American Association of Retired Persons, which this year included an all-expense-paid trip for Butler and Rudiger to AARP headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"I can honestly say that I feel like I've learned more during these sessions than I've taught," Rudiger said. "I mean, obviously they're taking in all this information and hopefully applying it every day but, for me, just talking with them and learning their stories is what draws me back every time. I love having those conversations."