

Ottawa-based volunteer program pairs tech workers with seniors



'They can make a valuable contribution to a senior's life and show them how to communicate with family'
By John Dujay

A lifetime of providing tech support to family and friends has spurred the creation of a new volunteer network by two Ottawa tech workers.

"For the last 16 to 20 years, we've been tech support for everybody in our intermediate network," said Emily Jones Jones Joanisse, co-founder and CEO of Connected Canadians, a non-profit volunteer organization.

"It occurred to us that we should take this hobby that we've had for years and combine it into something that will be more scalable and reach more people because both of us are kind of frustrated at the fact that even though we could help people on our own, we really couldn't reach that many, and this was an obvious need."

Jones Joanisse met Tas Damen, co-founder and CIO, while working at a former employer and both soon realized they had similar outlooks on life, she said.

"We were trying to figure out what we could do together as a social enterprise that would help people."

For both women, it seemed a natural fit to start helping older Canadians and to give back to the community, said Jones Joanisse.

"I've always helped seniors, like when I lived in Italy and Ottawa. I moved abroad for a few years and I worked for an NGO and I was helping several seniors at the NGO that I worked at and also at the school that I worked at."

"It's second nature, I think, to both of us," she said.

Valuable experience

The official launch of the network is taking place on Nov. 22, with sponsorship from Facebook and MC2, a Seattle-based content creation company (with a virtual office in Ottawa).

Connected has also heard from three Ottawa-area IT firms that want to partner with the organization, along with a group from Carleton University, said Jones Joanisse.

The organization offers various programs that enable volunteers to train seniors on such topics as setting up email, how to use video-chat programs and communicating by text using a cellphone. They offer one-on-one training sessions and instructor-led workshops.

"We're trying to create content so they can go from very beginners – how do you connect over cellular versus Wi-Fi – to being a bit more advanced. (Say) you want to share all the documents and pictures to sophisticated apps, how do you use Google Cloud versus iCloud and what are the differences from that standpoint?" said Damen.

The instructors visit retirement residences, usually on Saturday mornings, and spend about 45 minutes discussing a particular topic, she said.

"We will pair those general volunteers with seniors for one-on-one advice for about an hour, and the seniors will be able to meet up with that person again, if they want to, for further coaching and tutoring."

And an additional way for more people to get involved is for currently employed tech workers to use their employer-sponsored volunteer time, said Jones Joanisse.

"A lot of employers have volunteer-sponsored hours anyway, which people don't typically use; most people have about two days per year of hours and this allows employees (to use) those hours," she said. "They can actually make a really valuable contribution to a senior's life because they can show them how to communicate in a more effective way with their family."

The workers see the volunteer time with seniors as a "stepping stone" and gain valuable experience, said Jones Joanisse, while some who are immigrants use the opportunity to improve their English-language skills.

"Volunteers have said that it has given them a chance to help seniors in a way they never thought possible before. Many have had less-than-enjoyable interactions trying to help immediate family learn technology, but the dynamics are different with a stranger and everyone seems to find that key in making this an experience they want to repeat or do more often," she said.

"We've also had volunteers apply to us specifically saying in their application that they would like to gain experience with users who have visual impairments, to make them better able to understand the different types of clients they are developing software for."

The reaction from seniors so far has been "overwhelming," according to Jones Joanisse.

"Everywhere we go, it just seems to be we wish there was more, and they can't wait for us to come back in and our volunteers that we've managed to get to work along with us, the seniors that we're working with, love them," she said.

"They feel empowered, they feel like they're being given access to a world that they otherwise would not have had access to at all."

"We have an evaluation framework (and) based on that, they can request various workshops because, obviously this depends quite heavily on mental agility and the interest," she said.

"It is still very much a learning process from that standpoint but the thing that has been working really well for us is we have quite a loyal base of seniors who come and visit our workshops and so that gives us a very good way of choosing communication to continue to improve and enhance it from that standpoint."

While women are not actively being targeted, Connected Canadians is finding there is a much higher proportion of female seniors in the classes.

"I think that is very much related to the fact that women were not encouraged to study STEM fields in the earlier days and that was a big component of starting our We Can Help Your Mom campaign," said Jones Joanisse, which focuses on digital literacy for older women.

"There are so many older women that were not ever encouraged to study and to become comfortable with computer science topics, and we really feel like giving them a safe and accessible place where they can learn just as well as anyone else can, we hope to help... deal with that problem."

Power of tech

As with many volunteer organizations, Connected Canadians is actively searching for new funding.

"One of the reasons I really wish we had more money for our programs is a lot of the seniors who are lower income have really old, terrible devices and if we had the budget to do so, we would be able to give them something better to work with. We're constrained to the devices that they have right now," said Jones Joanisse.

When the seniors discover the power of the technology, "it's like bringing a kid to a library and just seeing all the knowledge that's out there," she said.

"That's one of the huge drivers behind why we do this, because we feel like it's such an unfair thing that there's this huge portion of our population that are basically ignored, and not given these tools.... We want to help change that."

In the future, the pair has new programs in store.

"One program is Smartphones for Seniors, mainly because we realized that having a combination of old laptops, old computers and all devices makes a barrier for them to connect; having more acceptable technology in a form of something that is compact and usable is the best medium for connectivity in reaching the seniors," said Jones Joanisse.

The rewards for the free programming come from a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, said Damen.

"From my perspective, it's not that we feel like we're going to teach every senior how to use technology effectively – of course, we would love to be able to do that – but we want to be able to provide the option for every Canadian senior to gain training if they so wished, (and) to understand what that training could mean to them."