

# Teens Bridge Digital, Generational Divide

Fort Wayne teens are teaching seniors to use computers; payoffs abound for all

By Graham Richard ■ *Mayor of Fort Wayne, Indiana*

A recent study found that 99 percent of U.S. public schools have access to computers and the Internet, and that young people are using the Internet more today than they did a year ago.

That same study also found that only a little more than a quarter of Americans 65 and older are Internet-literate.

## Meet the digital divide.

The older you are, the more likely you are to steer clear of a computer. The Pew Internet and American Life Project study found that 84 percent of all 18- to 29-year-olds use the computer. That number falls to 80 percent for people 30 to 49 and 78 percent for people 50 to 64. For people over 65, the rate of computer usage dwindles to only 26 percent.

The numbers shouldn't surprise us. Those who learn when they're young to use the Internet and who feel comfortable with Googling and instant messaging are more likely to continue those skills when they get older.

When those who are Internet illiterate were asked why they didn't use the Internet, they said it was because they're too old, like talking in person better than over a machine or are afraid of identity theft. And, they're just plain scared.

Who better to help computer-shy seniors learn than teenagers who take to computers like ducks to water? This spring in Fort Wayne, Indiana, teenagers are teaching senior citizens basic Internet skills. When the sessions are complete, organizers hope that seniors will be able to do everything from

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sending e-mails, ordering from online catalogues and researching information about their Medicare benefits.

Mostly, these teens are helping senior citizens feel more comfortable with technology so that they can stay connected.

The program – Net Literacy – is a new initiative for Fort Wayne, but is an extension of a program that began in Indianapolis in 2004 as a way to create a youth-powered community outreach organization. It's making a difference to thousands of Hoosier senior citizens. Fort Wayne is the first city outside of the state capital to use the program to bring together the generational and the digital divide.

It's a natural fit for Fort Wayne, one of the most connected cities in the country. In 2005, the city launched iTeams – citizen committees – to more strategically pro-

mote innovation and investment in the city. While Fort Wayne ranks 45<sup>th</sup> in the country in terms of Internet literacy among cities with populations of 200,000 or more, residents of Fort Wayne are eager to learn.

That's one of the reasons that Verizon jumped on board to provide \$25,000 toward the Net Literacy program. That sponsorship comes in addition to a nearly \$75 million investment in providing FiOS fiber optics to more than 100,000 Fort Wayne homes and businesses.

The program has attracted other community support as well. Fort Wayne Community Schools – our local school district – and Fort Wayne Urban League have helped recruit and identify teen mentors. The Urban League also helped recruit senior citizens for the program and opened its computer lab for training sessions. Adap-

## iTeams Harness Community Brainpower

Fort Wayne is leveraging its fiber broadband connections – existing networks to educational institutions, as well as a Verizon FiOS deployment – by bringing together all sectors of the community to discuss various ways the bandwidth can be exploited. Different iTeams have explored and are exploring initiatives related to education, economic development, public safety, and of course, seniors. The range of topics appears endless, says Mayor (and former venture capitalist) Graham Richard.



Mayor Graham Richard

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tive Micro-Ware, a Fort Wayne company, and Asset Forwarding, based in Indianapolis, have provided programming and computer upgrades. Companies throughout Fort Wayne donated nearly 200 computers for the program.

Daniel Jones, a 17-year-old Wayne High School senior and one of the program's first mentors, was looking forward to meeting his first student when we talked to him. He began learning about computers in school

when he was 10, but says he sympathizes with senior citizens who didn't grow up with the same technology.

"I think this is a great way to help people learn about computers," he said. "We teenagers are able to do something to help people learn something new."

That's just the beginning of the benefits of Net Literacy.

Senior citizens can feel left behind in a world that rapidly is changing all around them. Their grandchildren would rather communicate online than talk on the telephone. And then there's the phone company and the electric company, the local bank and even the Internal Revenue Service telling customers – telling seniors – to go online for more information, to pay their bills, file their taxes, even to get information about the new Medicare Part D program. Everything's online and seniors are finding themselves frustrated that they don't have the access they need.

Net Literacy will teach these skills. Beyond that, teens will help senior citizens stay connected to their families. They can learn how to download photos of their grandchildren, for example, or even use Web sites to play games and keep their minds active.

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Net Literacy is also unusual in that it brings together people who otherwise would not have met.

With the Urban League as a partner, it provides a common ground for teens and seniors to meet. We're hoping that this will bridge the digital divide and the generational divide.

"The Net Literacy program has taught me how to work with others, which is important because everyone is different," said Cierra Jackson, 15, and a North Side High School sophomore. "Think about your grandparents, and imagine teaching them about the computer and seeing the smiles on their faces."

I know from personal experience, that Net Literacy is going to change lives. At age 82, my father's vision loss prevented him from being able to drive.

We bought him a computer and engaged a high school student to train my father on the computer. My dad became a computer wiz.

Being able to bring young people together to make that kind of difference in the lives of others is a very powerful program – one that we'll all be benefiting from for years to come. **BBP**

**About the Author**

*Graham Richard is mayor of Fort Wayne, a city of 252,000 in northeastern Indiana.*



High schoolers prepare to teach Net Literacy to seniors.