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Little Elm, Prosper, Celina or McKinney.

The center is equipped with a 10-computer workstation and provides one-on-one help sessions as well as occasional computer courses.

Computer assistance is available from 1-3 p.m. on Wednesdays and from 7-9 p.m. on Thursdays. Individuals must first pass a computer skills “aptitude test” before they are allowed to use the computers on their own.

The computer classes they offer, which are sprinkled throughout the year, begin with the basics. The first two-hour session is devoted solely to teaching students how to use the computer mouse – how to “right click” and how to navigate around

a computer screen.

The second session covers how to use Microsoft Word; and the third session explores using Microsoft Excel. The final session focuses on using the Internet for researching and email.

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Ken Ralston, who retired from the insurance industry and moved to Frisco three years ago to be near family, teaches computer courses at the center. He says seniors often get computers from their children but haven't a clue how to even turn them on, much less use the Internet. Other seniors may want to purchase a computer to “get wired,” but often don't realize the expense involved.

“They all want to buy a computer so

Surfing Lessons for Seniors

By Susan Bland

SOME SENIOR CITIZENS want to learn how to “surf the net” to research health-related issues. Others are interested in learning to use the Internet so they can email their friends and family – especially their grandkids.

The incentive for Sara Wilkinson to learn how to use a computer: “I love sports,” she says. Most weekdays the retired high school English teacher can be found at the Senior Center at Frisco Square, surfing the Internet to look up stats on her favorite basketball and hockey players.

“For example, when (Dallas Mavericks guard) Doug Christie was waived I could go on-line and find out why he was released and where he is now,” says Mrs. Wilkinson. “You can't find all those things in a newspaper.”

Mrs. Wilkinson also uses the computers at the center to keep records and budgets for her Sunday school class and to replace the encyclopedias she no longer has for reference. It also gives her a place to get out and socialize. “If I had my own

computer, I'd never leave my apartment,” she says. “This way I'm out and about, and getting to know people.”

She says computer classes at the senior center “held her hand” through the process of learning to use computers and made navigating the waters of technology much easier. “I didn't even know how to operate a mouse at first,” she says. “But they took me through it one step at a time, very slowly, and that made a big difference.”

Even the most capable of senior citizens can find delving into the computer age a daunting prospect, says Clint Tennill Jr., the center's senior adult programmer. “It's like learning to drive a car when you've ridden a horse all your life.”

The center, which had more than 900 members register last year, is located at 6670 Moore Street and sits on the far east end of the Frisco Square Development off of Main Street and the North Dallas Tollway. Registration is free for Frisco residents, or \$2 per month for persons who live in the surrounding areas such as

they can do email,” says Mr. Ralston. He says he tries to advise his students to check the dollar amount they’re willing to spend. What some don’t know is that even a basic computer starts at about \$500. Then you can have some warranty expenses and another \$10 to \$20 or more to pay for your Internet service provider each month. “You can make a lot of phone calls for that much,” he says.

The extra expense of a computer and Internet fees may outweigh the benefits for some. Then there’s the issue of not only learning how to use the basic software – such as Microsoft Word – but also the fact that every Internet provider’s format is different.

Mr. Ralston says it’s often the case that someone will learn how to use Yahoo, but when they get their Internet service they have to start all over with another format such as those offered with their specific service provider. “Once you learn how to use one, you think they’re all going to be that way – and that’s not the case. It can really be confusing.”

Do all seniors struggle with joining the technology age? Of course not, says Bob King, president of the center’s advisory board.

He says one senior who recently enrolled in a computer course lived in an apartment, but the computer available there was constantly having problems. She learned a little more week by week, and pretty soon was knowledgeable enough to fix the computer problems at her apartment complex. “She wasn’t afraid to push buttons anymore,” Mr. King says.

Still, there remains the generational gap that fosters wariness of this strange new world. For instance, some seniors at the Frisco center who received help with their taxes this year were not willing to file their returns electronically. “They didn’t want their data floating out there,” says Mr. Ralston.

Internet shopping can also be a source of fearfulness. Divulging credit card and other personal information – and not knowing how it may be used – is a scary thought, especially to someone on a limited income and with the incidences of predatory “fishing” for information and identity theft constantly on the rise.

Mrs. Wilkinson says she doesn’t give out personal information over the phone, much less over the Internet. “I just don’t

feel comfortable with it,” she says. And as far as Internet shopping goes, “I just don’t have the need for it. I want to be able to see and feel or try on what I’m buying – and I’ve got every store I’d need right here in Frisco.”

Another option for seniors who wish to learn how to use a computer is the Collin County Community College (Collin) continuing education program, which also offers computer courses to help seniors get into the Internet scene. Some courses expected

to be available this fall are geared specifically for seniors through the college’s Seniors Active in Learning (SAIL) program. They offer a Worldwide Web Internet class and another that deals with researching health issues.

Collin’s SAIL program offers computer classes for seniors at all of their campuses. Courses cover a variety of subjects, including the use of e-Bay for fun and profit, buying a digital camera and digital photography, using Adobe Photoshop, researching genealogy, looking up immigration records and accessing health information.

A basic Worldwide Web Internet class offered by the SAIL program introduces seniors to “surfing the net.” A continuing education course called “Computers for Absolute Beginners” is not specifically designed for seniors but teaches computer skills starting from “ground zero.” Seniors are offered a 50 percent discount on continuing education classes outside the SAIL program.

“These (SAIL) computer classes work well for seniors,” says Jean Martin, SAIL program secretary. “They really wouldn’t



feel comfortable in the ‘usual’ computer classes. These work because they go at a slower pace and cover everything – starting at how to turn on the computer or use a mouse.”

The best piece of knowledge is help is available for seniors wanting to connect to and participate in new technology.

Susan Bland is a freelance writer living in Frisco.

COMPUTER COURSES FOR SENIORS are offered at various times throughout the year. For details, contact: Senior Center at Frisco Square 972.335.5515

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