Emeritus - iPad app gets suburban seniors into online world.

Using her stylus to move a red 5 of diamonds onto a black 6 of clubs, 89-year-old Simone Lucas chuckles at the absurdity of playing her first game of virtual solitaire on one of the newfangled iPads at her Emeritus Senior Living community in Hoffman Estates.

"Now this," she says, shaking her head of dynamic white hair, "is a trip."

"We're moving into the 21st century," says Ginna A. Baik, 42, the director of innovation and resident technology who is heading a pilot program for a new app designed specifically for people living in the Emeritus facilities in Hoffman Estates, Prospect Heights and other suburbs.

Sending her first email by tapping on a photo, Simone Lucas, right, uses a new iPad app created especially for the residents at Emeritus Senior Living. The new app will make seniors at the Hoffman Estates center more social, says Ginna Baik, left, director of innovation and resident technology.

You just sent your first email," Baik tells a grinning Eugene Keszycki, 89, a World War II veteran and retired machinist. As a "hammersmith," he swung a hammer to adjust diamond-tipped saw blades so that they made smooth cuts through stone. Now, he gently taps an iPad stylus the size of pencil to call up a photo of his granddaughter, Erica, in Georgia.

"I like it," he says with a touch of surprise in his voice.

While virtually all of their children and grandchildren are online, only 37 percent of 85-year-olds are, says Baik, who was hired to change that through this iPad program and a series of lessons.

""Computers sometimes are too complicated," she says.

Lucas and fellow resident Kathleen Dammjanovic discover the karaoke app on their iPads and join Baik and Emeritus community relations director Chris Lynn as a quartet performing Frank Sinatra's classic "My Way."

"You got a picture of Sinatra on there?" Keszycki quips.

Today's lesson introduces email but progresses to games and entertainment. By next lesson, these residents will jump into video chats with the grandkids and on to virtual bingo featuring online games with other residents here and at other Emeritus locations, Baik says.

"What's unique about this is that we created this application," Baik says, explaining how residents can just tap the photograph of a neighbor, relative or friend to send an email without having to remember an address or type a long strand with @ signs and dot-coms. "It's like training wheels for the Internet."

The app is a closed system, accessible by invitation only, so residents won't get the usual spam and scam emails from phony Nigerian bank presidents, fake lottery officials or others who often target senior citizens online.

Many residents of senior living facilities feel isolated and trapped by a lack of independence, Baik says. The new app offers them socialization and freedom, she says. The residents no longer are limited to watching a scheduled movie in the lounge. They can select from a vast library of films (even including old silent movies) to watch anytime on their iPads. Same with books. They also can use the app to take virtual tours of museums and cities around the globe.

When residents had a question about the colorful birds in a cage in the lobby, they looked up the birds on their iPads and watched videos of them in their native land, Baik says.

The Emeritus app provides a second chance to 62-year-old widow Kathleen Dammjanovic of Roselle, who turned down a chance to go online when she still was able to work.

"I chose not to because it was faster for me to do it the old way. I stupidly said no to computers," Dammjanovic says. "Now, I am saying yes."

Even if you are old enough to remember life before computers, being comfortable with the online world is a must, says Ginna Baik, center, director of innovation for Emeritus Senior Living. Baik helps Eugene Keszycki, left, and Kathleen Dammjanovic with their new iPad apps.

"During the war, I played pinochle with my father and his old cronies," remembers Simone Lucas, 89, as she quickly gets the hang of using a special app to play virtual solitaire at Emeritus Senior Living in Hoffman Estates.
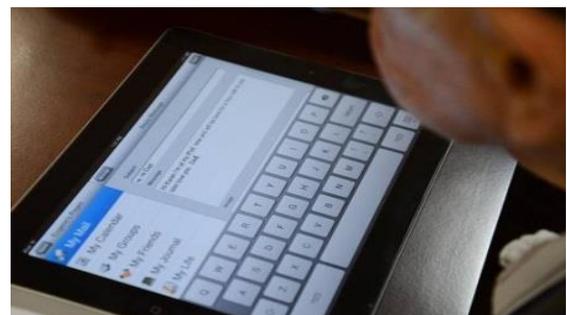
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In one lesson, she learns how to send emails to her three daughters and three grandsons.

"You're learning it now," says Raj Upadhyaya, a 47-year-old Emeritus resident who worked in IT management before health problems forced him into assisted living four years ago. The iPad is a new experience for him, but he's already volunteering to help other residents.

A bookkeeper who worked with some of the first computers, Lucas quickly figures out how to send an email to a niece in Wisconsin. "She'll be shocked when she gets it, believe me," says Lucas, who turns 90 on Oct. 4. "I want to learn everything on it. I think it's fascinating. I am old, but I don't give in to it. I'm willing to learn."

The frequent in-person family visits in the facilities still will remain popular, Lynn says. But she says the social media aspects of the new app will allow for more communication by the residents, even those who don't feel well enough to go on field trips or leave their rooms.

The bustling environment of making and maintaining friendships through social media reminds Baik of a younger world.

"It is like you are in high school or in college," she says of launching the Emeritus network.

Since young people sometimes run afoul online, might the senior population run into some of those same problems of sharing too much information, posting offensive opinions or even veering off into sexting and other inappropriate behavior?

"If you come back to me in another couple of years, we might have that discussion," Baik says with a smile. For now, seniors have other online worlds to conquer.

"One of the things we're hoping to do in October," Baik says, "is virtual bingo between the communities."