

Technology Expo bridges generations



Keely Liska, center, is among the tech-savvy Richland Middle School students who shared their expertise with older adults at a June 2012 Technology Expo coordinated by principal Dave Guy, left; UW-Extension's Steve Kohlstedt, right, and other partners.

The teacher: A seventh-grader.

The students: 22 senior citizens.

The subject: Skype.

The setting: Part of a June 2012 Technology Expo staffed by 67 middle-schoolers who helped 150 Richland County seniors explore how cell phones, social media and other communication tools could help them connect to their families and friends.

Here's the back story, told by one of the young volunteers, her principal and Steve Kohlstedt, community development agent for Richland County UW-Extension and a partner in the Active Aging Research Center.

"We did a community analysis that showed isolation was a big problem for local seniors," Steve says. "How could we help them be more engaged, more active, more connected?"

Social media and technology seemed obvious answers; however, the Active Aging Richland County team's survey of 180 local seniors found they were "afraid" of technology.

Aware of research showing that grandparents often listen more to their grandchildren than to their own children, the team turned to Richland Middle School for help. Steve and the principal met with student volunteers to get their ideas on how technology could help local seniors stay safe and healthy in their homes.

Principal Dave Guy says, "You never really know what direction something like this will take. But the kids ultimately opened up a whole new approach to problem-solving."

Steve says, "The kids started sharing some of the challenges their grandparents had. They're the

ones who came up with the idea of having a tech fair at the school.”

Keely Liska was among the middle school students who volunteered to staff the two-day Technology Fair. They greeted participants, answered questions and provided technical advice for more than 150 seniors about Skype, mobile apps, Kindles, the Internet and online fitness programs for older adults.

“I got to see things from their point of view and they could see it from mine,” says Keely, talking about how she enjoyed meeting older people and learning that they had so many questions.

If the kids couldn’t answer a question, they helped seniors find answers online, Keely says, offering an example: “One lady asked us how to program her ham radio. We didn’t know how but showed her how to use Google and YouTube to find the answers.”

When asked about the future of the Technology Expo, Keely says the bigger, the better: “We could expand on what we did for people and include more demonstrations for those who wanted them.”

Her principal concludes, “A lot came out of this effort. The students learned about leadership, and the relationship-building was awesome.” Since the expo, some students have volunteered to teach older adults about technology at the senior center.

Steve of UW-Extension notes the strength of the local, state and university collaboration that made the Technology Expo a success: “We had many partners and researchers sharing knowledge and resources. But the real story is how local people made it happen.”

Richland County is one of three counties selected to participate in the initiative through the [Active Aging Research Center](#) [1]. The center is an ongoing collaboration among the UW-Madison Center for Health Enhancements Systems Studies (CHESS), the Richland County Aging and Disability Resource Center, the Milwaukee County Department on Aging, the Waukesha Aging and Disability Resource Center and UW-Extension.

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