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'A bit of joy': New online platform connects Northeast Florida seniors to classes and each other

Classes range from how to navigate Zoom or share photos on Instagram to heart-healthy cooking and stress management techniques

Beth Reese Cravey Florida Times-Union
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Melinda Rakoncaj of St. Augustine merged her love of wine and her sister-in-law when the two women took an interactive wine-appreciation class offered by GetSetUp. The online platform for older adults is offering free classes through a partnership with ElderSource, which serves Northeast Florida seniors. *Provided By Melinda Rakoncaj*

Retiree Melinda Rakoncaj in St. Augustine and her sister-in-law in Baltimore found a way to have fun together without leaving their respective houses or putting themselves at risk of catching COVID-19.

They took an interactive online wine-appreciation class, one of about 200 classes for seniors offered by GetSetUp. The options range from how to navigate Zoom or share photos on Instagram to heart-healthy cooking and stress management.

"We took the class together and then talked about it afterward," Rakoncaj said. "Lots of seniors are stuck at home alone."

"It is an excellent tool. I highly recommend it."

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GetSetUp is a new online learning platform that offers classes specifically for older adults. In a pilot partnership with Jacksonville-based ElderSource, which serves seniors in Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, St. Johns and Volusia counties, the platform has about 70 classes available for area seniors for free through the end of June.

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"GetSet Up is a great tool for older adults to be connected to fun and educational activities," said ElderSource CEO Linda Levin. "Since the senior centers continue to be closed [because of the COVID-19 pandemic], many people are looking for programs that are easy to access and provide a bit of joy to their daily routines."

The live aspect of the classes, which are led by senior instructors, make them "special," she said.

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"The classes are not a recording. People can actually interact with others in the class and ask questions of the instructor," she said.

Rakoncaj, who has also taken introductory Zoom and iPhone classes and a class on how to sell items safely online, said GetSetUp's sign-up process is "highly user-friendly" for seniors.

"It's laid out pretty well, kind of easy," she said. "It's awesome." Also, instructors send participants class notes afterward and links to watch a video of the class, she said.

Judy Jackson, also of St. Augustine, has taken classes about use of iPads, smartphones and Zoom, password protection and one that provided a museum tour. She plans to sign up for many more and said she may even retake a few she's already experienced "to make sure I understood it all."

GetSetUp is a "golden opportunity to learn" while at home during the pandemic, she said.

"Being 84 years old and not around younger techie smart people, I felt in need of a lot of information," she said. "The classes are a prompt one-hour with ... pictures of class members, so put on your lipstick. You can ask questions and make comments, so it's interactive. The teachers are kind and understanding of our lack of knowledge."

Jackson urged people new to GetSetUp to take the orientation class first and, if certain topics have beginners-level classes, start with them.

California-based GetSetUp was founded by Lawrence Kosick and Neil Dsouza. Kosick said they were inspired by seniors in their lives "who had so much wisdom and so much more to offer, yet almost seemed forgotten."

They "wanted to create a platform where re-skilled older adults could help other older adults learn the things they needed to learn to live happy, healthy, more connected lives. A true interactive Senior to Senior platform," Kosick said.

They add 30 to 40 new classes every month. Categories not only include introductory technology and health and wellness, but personal enrichment such as learning new skills or taking virtual tours of museums and social hours such as book clubs and discussion groups. Topics change daily and are often repeated.

Instructors are selected "based on passion, empathy and expertise and experience," Kosick said. Instructors for academic classes go through a one-week internal academy.

Marv Thiem and his dog Spike lead a social hour called "Talk'n About Dogs" on GetSetUp, an online platform that provides about 200 classes for older adults. *Screen Grab - Beth Reese Cravey/Florida Times-Union*

Instructor: 'Now I can't wait to get up'

One of the instructors is senior Marv Thiem of Utah, who leads an orientation class and, with his dog Spike, a social hour called "Talk'n About Dogs." The canine class is for people who are interested in dogs and includes topics such as dog toys, diets and habits. Dog owners are encouraged to bring their dog to class.

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"I had a dog at one time who loved to watch television," Thiem said in an introductory video. "Spike loves everybody. He loves to eat, he loves food and he loves his toys."

Thiem said he was at loose ends before joining the online platform.

"Now I can't wait to get up in the morning to have classes," he said.

Thiem said his wife had discovered the same benefit as Rakoncaj and her sister-in-law. They have two sisters and they all live in different states.

"Every two weeks they'll pick a class and afterward they'll have a ball talking about the class," he said.

"It's fabulous. People are there behind those doors, so lonely, so depressed," he said. The classes give them an opportunity to interact with people, learn new things and go on virtual adventures, he said.

Kosick said GetSetUp has been working with Area Agencies on Aging, such as ElderSource, and state and county governments "to make virtual classes as available to older adults as possible." The pilot program with ElderSource is funded by a grant from the Administration for Community Living, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"Especially now, this demographic is largely stuck at home and in need of a way to access more services virtually," he said. "ElderSource is progressive and taking a lead in making sure their older adults have access to the best resources available. We reached out to them and they were immediately responsive. Our experience with them has been great."

Kosick (right) and Dsouza *Provided By GetSetUp*

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As of last week, 46 Northeast Florida seniors had signed up for GetSetUp classes through ElderSource. Each selected an average of 3.25 classes; the most popular were iPhone Basics, Line Dancing and beginners classes for Zoom and Qigong, an ancient Chinese breathing and movement routine.

"We continue to be amazed by the positive reactions to these classes," Kosick said. "In many cases these are the first times in months that many of our older learners have had a live interaction and conversation with others. We regularly see tears of happiness. It makes our work all that much more worthwhile."

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GETSETUP VIA ELDERSOURCE

If you're a senior living in Northeast Florida, join GetSetUp for free through ElderSource by going to getsetup.io/partner/eldersource using a tablet, personal computer or smart phone. For more information call ElderSource at (904) 391-6699.



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