

# Helping the Older Generation Connect and Learn the Language of Technology

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*Jordan Mittler, a sophomore at The Ramaz Upper School in New York City, is the founder of Mittler Senior Technology, a company that helps senior citizens adapt to the world of technology. In this KWHS student essay, Jordan shares the story of how he started his business and why it has become so critical during this time of social isolation — especially in New York City, the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.*

*In the next few months, KWHS will be featuring a new essay every week, written by students around the world who are at home and eager to share their stories of entrepreneurship, leadership and experiences with business.*

Five years ago, I gifted my grandparents, Janet and Mark Mittler, iPhones because it was painful for me to watch them still using flip phones! I have always been passionate about technology. I needed to get my grandparents, with whom I am very close, on board with the latest gadgets. It never even occurred to me that they would have no idea how to use an iPhone. They did not know how to perform many of the basic functions that come so easily to my generation, such as texting, Face Timing, photographing — and the list goes on.

And so, the idea for my business was born. I knew I needed to help this older generation, who missed the technology boom and was literally scared of trying to figure out our new connected world. As a result of this very real fear, they were often left alone and out of touch because they couldn't communicate like everyone else.

## **Bonnie's Got Mail**

I decided to test my market concept at the local nursing home. I will never forget walking through those doors. I was only 11 at the time, and the director looked at me as if I had 10 heads. I went to the recreation floor and asked over a microphone: "Who would like free technology help?" I only had one taker. Her name was Bonnie Fisher, and I sat with her one-on-one for more than a year providing technology lessons. You should have seen Bonnie light up when she figured out how to connect with her sister and friends over email! I needed to figure out a way to reach a bigger audience.

I reached out to my temple and asked if they would send a letter by mail promoting free technology help to all of their members over the age of 65. The synagogue was flooded with phone calls from interested seniors looking to enroll in tech class each Sunday. My temple, affiliated with my school, also let me use the school's computer lab to hold my weekly classes. So many seniors showed interest that I had to maintain a waitlist. I got them into the classroom and taught them everything from texting to FaceTime and how to navigate the internet.

Fast forward to February 2020, and my classes were booming. I had even inspired some of my friends to join me in volunteering their time as teaching assistants. I had just added another class to fit in as many beginner and intermediate seniors as possible, and I felt like I was in a very good position to start scaling my business to reach even more learners.

We all know what happened next. Coronavirus swept through the world and our country, hitting the senior population the hardest and having a grim impact on New York City (reporting more than 800 deaths through the beginning of April). During this time, I canceled my Sunday classes as my own schedule moved to at-home online learning.

I also realized, however, that senior citizens were suddenly even more cut off than ever. This new world of distancing was going to throw the older generation into more social isolation than they had ever experienced. One of my students,

Roz Zuger, is 94 years old. I knew she would be disappointed without her weekly dose of tech class. So, I decided that I would attempt to continue my classes online via Zoom and walk all of my seniors through setting up the application and account. I started with Roz, spending endless phone calls with her to get her set up and comfortable with the online meeting platform. Roz had lots of trouble with the audio function on Zoom, and we slowly worked through this together.

After missing only one in-person class – and sending multiple texts and reminder calls — I had my whole class plus others online with me for our first virtual session. I updated my curriculum to be most helpful for seniors during this time when they were homebound and alone. For example, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, the Rabbi Emeritus of my synagogue and Principal Emeritus of my school, needed help creating a group chat so he could communicate with all his children at one time. He was having particular trouble setting this up. I was able to show him virtually how to work through all the issues.

### **Facetiming and Ordering Groceries Online**

The key to my teaching success with the older generation is showing, not just explaining. For seniors, talking in technology terms is less effective than presenting them with a visual of how to do something. They're just not used to the language of technology. Roz, for example, was only able to launch Zoom after I Facetimed with her and sent her pictures via text of the next steps she needed to take. I helped Rabbi Lookstein by sharing visuals with him from my own computer screen.

In the past few weeks, we have been figuring this out as we go along – and it's working. I started to record all of my Zoom sessions, so the seniors could replay any section of our class for review. After each online session, I send out a link to the recording, as well as a message with everything covered in class that day. My updated curriculum includes showing my students (which total some 80 seniors) how to order groceries online, how to order from Amazon, how to Facetime to stay connected, how to access online newspapers, and, of course, how to mute and unmute their Zoom audio.

It has been really rewarding for me to help so many people become tech-savvy during a time when technology has never been more fundamental to our daily lives. Social distancing has helped me bridge even further the gap between generations – and empower older people with the very valuable tool of connection.