

New tech lab helps seniors stay connected



By Brock Weir

In any new situation, there is always the fear of the unknown and sometimes it can be hard to step over that threshold, but local seniors are taking those first steps in connecting and re-connecting with their families, friends and communities thanks to CHATS and the Federal Government.

The ribbon was formally cut Friday afternoon on the CHATS Seniors' Technology Lab, a hub that will serve not only their clients in York Region and south Simcoe Region, but the community at large.

Made possible with a \$25,000 grant from the Federal Government's New Horizons for Seniors program, the technology lab currently boasts four desktop computers for seniors to use, each stationed at electronically adjustable desks for maximum accessibility, eight iPads to extend the learning process, and numerous programs to get users up to speed on basic computer skills and even more advanced online programs.

‘One of our first users said they were afraid of pressing the wrong button and breaking something because they still don't have the context,’ said CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz. ‘This is designed to be a safe space. You can play with it and you won't have to worry about breaking the computer. It's okay to experiment, okay to try things.’

Clients of CHATS, which stands for Community & Home Assistance to Seniors, have had the opportunity to get a head start on the new Technology Lab and are already seeing results. Volunteers lending a hand to make it happen are coming in as well, including a retired IBM professional and a woman who operated a similar technology lab in her native Iran.

Joslyn Bresette, Recreation Programmer at CHATS, recalls one of the first users coming in. This woman already had an email address, but did not have a regular means of using it.

‘She came in last week and now she can come in and check her emails,’ Bresette recalled. ‘When she sent one out, in big capital letters, she said ‘I AM SENDING THIS FROM OUR NEW CHATS TECHNOLOGY LAB’ and she loved that was an option now.’ That was music to the ears of all assembled at CHATS' Edward Street headquarters last week for the formal dedication, including Aurora Mayor Geoff Dawe, Newmarket Mayor Tony Van Bynan, and, there to see the results after presenting the grant last year, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev.

‘Technology is increasing so quickly that most of our communications are now digital and this gives seniors the opportunity to not only use technology, but be able to stay engaged with the world and engaged with their families,’ she said. ‘Here, we are able to bring them into an environment where they can be engaged, continue to be engaged and participating members of the community and that is just fantastic.’

Ms. Bisanz told those assembled to cut the ribbon that the \$25,000 grant allowed them not only to put the lab together, but support staff investments to really maximize its potential.

‘It is a very innovative program [that was] inspired by seniors for seniors,’ said Ms. Bisanz. ‘Some of our volunteers, as well as our senior clients, had expressed an interest and a desire to be able to participate more in the digital world and have a little bit more understanding of how to use social media in order to connect, for the most part, with their family members and grandchildren, and

also within the community. We thought this would be a really great opportunity to look at how we could support connectivity for people who otherwise may not have computers in their own home.

?It is an initiative that we believe will have a long-term impact on our community, not just locally but we're hoping to look at how we can expand this to other areas of York Region and South Simcoe. It is designed to serve two objectives: to provide us with the tools to do this, but also to provide us with our own incentive to look at ways in which we can use a seniors technology lab, and in new and innovative ways.?

Over the last two years, CHATS has been working on a story telling project, collecting the stories and life lessons of their clients, and now, with this in place, they are examining ways in which they can virtually connect caregivers as well.

?We anticipate that this lab, which will not only be accessible to our own clients but seniors in the community, that we will be able to have about 100 seniors working through the program and having access to the Seniors Technology lab in a year,? said Ms. Bisanz.

?That is our optimistic goal. We're very excited and we think this is just the start. It's just a room [right now] but it has a lot of purpose and that purpose has been made possible by the New Horizons grant.?

Training programs and ongoing support has been developed in partnership with the Aurora Public Library.

For more information on the CHATS' Seniors Technology Lab, and even how to get involved as a volunteer, visit www.chats.on.ca or call 905-713-6596.