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Web Surf is Up for tech-savvy seniors

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When the Seniors Computer Group throws itself a 27th anniversary party at the Wesley Palms retirement community today, the members will celebrate with a nice potluck repast, along with a short class on Microsoft Word from local tech expert Gini Pedersen.



For the people who come to these weekly Saturday-morning get-togethers with their computer-newbie issues, their Adobe Flash tips and their thoughts on the merits of meetup.com, the meeting will be friendly and informative. And if the rest of us are lucky enough to live long and prosper, this gathering of San Diego's wise and wired could represent the best-case scenario for our futures. On and off the grid.

"Because of the Qualcomm's of the world, a lot of people in San Diego are involved in technology," club vice president Tom Sprague said during last week's meeting. "We have a lot of expertise in this room."

Dubbed one of the country's most-wired cities by the experts at Forbes.com and the Federal Communications Commission, San Diego is a hub of broadband-assisted activity. We also make regular appearances on the Forbes list of America's Healthiest Cities.

And at the intersection of healthy and techie you will find the Seniors Computer Group, where energetic and intellectually curious people like the 90-year-old Tom Schuettge are Facebook-using, Skype-savvy examples of being in the prime of your San Diego life.

"I came here to learn more," said Schuettge, who runs the computer lab at Wesley



Palms, which lets the nonprofit group hold its meetings there. "You keep your ears open and you find out a lot of things."

While you must be 50 years or older to become a voting member, the Seniors Computer Group is open to anyone. The dues are \$15 for the first year and \$12 a year after that. And what do you get for your money? A subscription to the monthly newsletter, free tea and

coffee and invaluable nuggets of wisdom. Here are a few I picked up in just one morning:

(Online) hope springs eternal: How sad is it that your 5-year-old knows your iPhone better than you do? That you can't keep up with every little Facebook change? That you know you should check out Google Chrome, but you're not sure why?

Even in wired San Diego, traversing the ever-changing tech landscape can be an exhausting, ego-bruising experience. Especially when you feel like you have no right to ask for help. ("I live in one of America's Top 20 Most Wired Cities! What's wrong with me?")

But as 95-year-old Paul Elarde will be happy to remind you, knowledge is power. And lack of knowledge is not a sin; it's an opportunity.

"People will come here and say, 'I'm too stupid to use a computer,' and I'll say, 'You're not stupid. You're just uninformed,'" said Elarde, a former physicist who is the head of the group's education committee. "I have two guys who help me. One is called 'Trial' and one is called 'Error,' and that's how I learn."

Don't forget the fun: In his blazer and turtleneck, Fred Wassermann is one of the best-dressed members of the Seniors Computer Group. He is also a dapper reminder that you're not a slave to technology if the technology is serving you.

What does this retired engineer do with his computer? He uses Slingbox to send American TV shows to a daughter living in the Middle East. He shoots adorable videos of his dog Oliver "foster parenting" kittens for the Humane Society and posts them on Oliver's own YouTube channel. He does a lot of digital artwork.

"The computer is stressful and troublesome, but it makes you think," Wassermann said. "It keeps the gray-matter active."

Lo-tech? No problem!: What if you don't want to learn more? What if the thought of spending the next few decades mastering every new gadget, program and application to come down the pike makes you feel like you're 90 already? Not to worry. In their infinite wisdom, the members of the Seniors Computer Group have an answer for that, too.



"My wife doesn't even want to dust the darned thing, and she's leading a happy life," Schuettge said with a fond smile. "There so much stuff on TV and there is so much to read about in the newspaper. You're not kept away from the world if you're not always on the computer."

And if you are lucky enough to live long and prosper, you might end up swapping Skype stories with San Diego's wise and wired seniors.