

# Bridging generations, Cherry Creek students act as volunteer “geek squad” for retirement community

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Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post

Elizabeth Lapporte, 18, right, helps Sue Sherman, 76, to sync her smartphone and computer at Holly Creek Retirement Community on Saturday, Nov. 16, 2019.

By [Meg Wingerter](#) | [mwingerter@denverpost.com](mailto:mwingerter@denverpost.com) | The Denver Post  
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Every Saturday, a sort of “geek squad” sets up shop at a Centennial retirement community to help residents stream, surf and connect.

Unlike professional troubleshooters, however, the members of this tech-support team are supposed to linger to catch up on whatever happened during the week, and they know their repeat customers’ names and stories.

Zachary Wang and Simar Chadha, both seniors at Cherry Creek High School, started Generation Tech in December 2018, after Wang saw a need while volunteering with an adult day program. More than 50 students volunteer on Saturdays at Holly Creek Living, teaching residents to use their devices and hopefully making connections.

“It might start with the technology, but we want to really get to know the residents,” Wang

said.

Intergenerational programs can be challenging to start and sustain because of a lack of government and philanthropic funding, but advocates think they could take off in the Denver area.

Rachel Cohen, project manager for LinkAges, which helps coordinate programs to reduce social isolation, said some recent successes include bringing high school students together with residents at Kavod Senior Life to make holiday foods; offering a music class for preschoolers and residents at Shalom Park; and pairing University of Denver photography students with older people for an interview and portrait session.

In the case of the DU project, the older people reported feeling more hopeful after meeting with the young people for a few hours, and one of the students liked it so much she wanted to set up a pen-pal program, Cohen said.

“It’s creating that space” for people to interact, she said. “That’s where the magic happens.”

Studies have found high rates of social isolation and loneliness among both older people and young adults. The effects of loneliness aren’t as well-studied in young people, but seniors who feel alone are at a higher risk of dying of multiple chronic conditions than those who feel well-supported.



Hyoungh Chang, The Denver Post

Nate Sunker, 14, left, and Vibhu Agrawal, 17, right, show Hugh Petrie, 82, how to use an Amazon Alexa at Holly Creek Retirement Community on Nov. 16, 2019.

## “It’s become learning”

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Janine Vanderburg, director of Changing the Narrative in Colorado, an anti-ageism campaign, said research on intergenerational programs is ongoing, but the most successful ones tend to start with a clear intention, like reducing ageism or social isolation. Done well, intergenerational programs can reduce the belief that older people no longer have anything to offer, she said.

For most of human history, grandparents, parents and children lived together, with older people watching little ones, who eventually grew up to take care of their elders, said Sheri Steinig, the Denver-based special programs director at Generations United. Many families no longer live that way, so kids and their grandparents are missing out on the chance to learn from each other, she said.

“For years, intergenerational living was the way we lived,” she said. “The opportunities for those connections are just not as prevalent as they were.”

April Henderson, director of community life at Holly Creek, said Generation Tech is one of the retirement community's newer partnerships. Some residents participate in a pen-pal program with second-graders at a nearby elementary school, and others like to meet with kindergarteners who come to sing and do crafts, she said.

The tech assistance gives residents someone they feel comfortable asking for help, and gives the students access to potential mentors, Henderson said. At first, the students mostly did troubleshooting, but now they've taken on more of a teaching role for residents who want to stay connected virtually, she said.

"It's become more than just problem-solving," she said. "As the relationships developed, it's become learning."



Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post

Ed Van Bramer, 79, left, asks Neil Patel, 18, about a smartphone app at Holly Creek Retirement Community on Saturday, Nov. 16, 2019. The nonprofit Generation Technology connects students with senior citizens to provide technological instruction.

## Making connections

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On a Saturday in mid-November, the appointment requests included figuring out why a woman's DVD player suddenly was showing color films in black and white, helping a man set up a smart speaker and getting another woman's computer-based calendar to sync with

her smartphone. A few residents also stopped the students in the hallways to ask for help with their smartphones and tablets.

“I just need to know how to get the dot,” Norma Burch, 91, asked a trio of students as they headed to an appointment. One of the students showed Burch how to switch from letters to symbols while typing on her tablet, so she could finish putting in an email address.

Sue Sherman, 76, whose computer and smartphone were refusing to sync, said she enjoyed how the students made technology understandable, and might ask them to help her set up video streaming the next time they came.

“They don’t talk down to you,” she said.



Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post

Elizabeth Lapporte, 18, left, helps Elaine Walsh, 81, connecting the DVD player to the television at Holly Creek Retirement Community on Saturday, Nov. 16, 2019.

When the Cherry Creek students met with Hugh Petrie to help set up a smart speaker, the conversation quickly turned from what digital assistant Alexa could do to the bigger questions surrounding artificial intelligence. Petrie, 82, said that like most technology, it had the potential for both good and harm, and suggested an Ian McEwan novel about a man who buys an intelligent robot. The students also had some information to share, including how smart speakers use what they learn about their owners to target ads.

“I asked her, ‘Alexa, can people steal our personal information from you?’ She said she didn’t know,” Petrie said with a smile.

Neil Patel, a senior at Cherry Creek High, said he’s worked with Petrie multiple times, and was surprised to find out they’d visited some of the same places and had played some of the same sports.

“I didn’t really think that I could bond with someone who’s that much older,” he said.