"READ OUR COOKIE POLICY"

*Lexington High's Rising Senior
Who's Educating Seniors on Tech*

By Andrew Cook

A show of hands if this sounds familiar:

You're home watching TV, and either in the actual program itself or in the commercial breaks in-between, there's a dramatization of a phone conversation with an elderly relative, who's talking much too loudly into their mouthpiece.

"Sheesh," the other person grumbles, holding the receiver further and further away from their assaulted eardrum, "they don't even need the phone for me to hear them two towns over." Their TV remote is malfunctioning and the expletive-thing doesn't work at all, there's too many buttons and we never should have gotten it in the first place – when, really, it just needed a change of batteries.

It's a trope so widespread that you could call it lazy without any fear of retaliation: it's generally believed that senior citizens just *don't* understand technology. Their Herculean struggles to use social media and smart-home devices like Amazon's Alexa have been mined for inspiration without

mercy by skit writers on Saturday Night Live and Comedy Central, and every third smartphone commercial seems to boast "*it's so easy, grandma could do it*!"

Frankly, after a while, such ads and skits add up into a grossly unfair, one-way bullying campaign against elder members of the community who may have grown up without televisions, let alone modern pocket-sized miracle devices.

But one rising senior at Lexington High School is here to change all that.

Sixteen year-old Greg Conrad describes himself as always having been, "*curious...* always hitting the keyboard and stuff, trying to figure out how things work." He's one of those people who, for lack of a better term, *gets* technology. If computers are a language, Conrad just seems to have been born with an innate fluency in it.

"In middle school," he recalls, "I learned this thing called Scratch, which is basically like an introductory programming language. I actually ended up

Greg Conrad

teaching a class on it to some of my peers, and it was pretty successful, and I ended up getting asked by my principal to do it again because so many people liked it. That's where I really think my computer skills and interest in computer science started, and I realized 'Wow, I really like this a lot!'"

Conrad carried on through middle and high school, creating waves on Lexington High's competitive swim team and working as a lifeguard at

local swimming pools (whenever he wasn't delving into new computer programs), when he suddenly stumbled across the beginnings of an intriguing idea. He was visiting his grandmother, who he sees frequently and shares a close relationship with, and was enlisted by her for some tech support at her Peabody apartment. She'd gotten a new computer, and was having the usual difficulties with operating it. "At first I was just helping her a
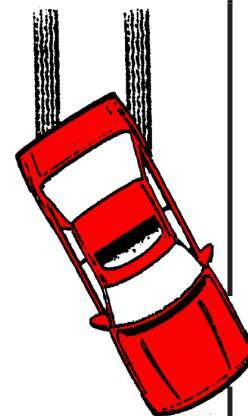
lot," says Conrad, "then afterwards, some of her friends needed help with their stuff, and I was just like, 'Huh, this would be a really good idea if there was a company in this area to help seniors who need assistance with tech.' I looked around, and found out there wasn't really any Lexington-based local company that was geared towards seniors, so I decided to start up my own."

Conrad created Senior Technology Services, a local help program dedicated exclusively towards educating seniors about technology usage while lending a helping hand for any problems that arise along the way.

"I really take my time and make sure that whoever I'm helping understands the steps of whatever issue it is we're working through. If it's something really complicated, I'll do it for them, and then explain why I'm doing what I'm doing so they'll know what to do if or when it happens the next time, and I'll say it in a really easy-to-understand way."

This more comprehensive, quality-over-quantity type approach is just one of several reasons Conrad believes his Senior Technology Services might be a better option for area seniors, rather than more widespread tech-help groups such as Best Buy's Geek Squad. The Geek Squad and other similar agencies perform the same kind of services as Conrad, and have an added pedigree of professionalism to their credit. However, the scale of these larger groups and their clientele often dictates, by simple business math, that they move on to the next customer as soon as a short-term solution has been reached – leaving many seniors feeling perplexed as to what exactly occurred, and totally ill-prepared should it ever happen again. "Plus," Conrad continues, "their services can sometimes be really expensive, and I try and keep it cheaper, so it's more affordable for more people, and more of a community service aspect than just a for-profit thing."

In truth, it'd be hard to find better rates *anywhere* than the ones Conrad offers. "I came up with three prices," he explains. "I normally do it for $25 per hour, but if the person I'm helping doesn't have any money or resources available, I can work for free. Or you can pay me in baked goods, because I really love eating!"

The tech world has never had a more literal meaning for "brownie points."

It's a charming business model, and one Conrad hopes others can soon begin to take part in. He's entering his college application process, and is already mindful about what Senior Technology Service's next chapter will be. "I really want Senior Technology Services to grow," he says, "and I don't say that just from my end. I want the Lexington-area senior community to really benefit from it, and stay connected with their friends or whatever. I'm heading off to college soon, and obviously it'll be a lot harder for me to run it except during the summers, so maybe I'll find someone who's younger who can take over and still continue to run it."

Some eyebrows might raise at a tech business led by someone Conrad's age (or even younger, as he hopes), but the way he sees it, youth here is an advantage, a crucial factor that enables him to provide these services in the first place. "As people my age have been growing up," he says, "we've never *not* been without technology… we've always had computers and smartphones just around us in the general world, so a basic part of my growing up has just meant that I've had loads of opportunities to learn about tech very early. And once you learn the first time, it's easy to do, so I guess it's just lucky for me."

Therein lies the likely root cause for Senior Technology Service's existence, however – the same unfair reason that Saturday Night Live can milk laughs at seniors' expense. It may indeed have been a lucky break for Conrad and others of his generation to grow up in a smart-phone world, but it's important to remember that tech education and similar opportunities just didn't exist for people of a certain age, many of whom have to wonder (rightly so) if all this new-fangled tech even has a worthwhile purpose. It's no enviable world, after all, where hand-helds and hashtags could replace genuine face-to-face interaction.

Conrad, however, has an answer to this as well. "I don't view social media as a replacement for [human interaction]," he says, "I view it as an *addition*. It should be a tool to help you get *more* connections, not stand as a substitute in place of them."

"A lot of my clientele have a hard time moving around and interacting with people like they used to," he continues. "[They're] people who are disabled or can't get out easily (that's why I take Senior Technology Services to their homes, instead of vice versa). Technology and social media are great ways to stay connected to others, especially now in the 21st century. People, and not just older people either, are so busy that it can be harder to stay connected… hour-long phone conversations aren't really a thing anymore. On social media, you can just quickly post something and then everyone can see it. And we help with all of that."

While tech ignorance may be the unwanted trope of Senior Technology Service's clientele, tech obsession is undoubtedly the one society attaches to the generation of its founder: oblivious, self-obsessed, and with no appreciation for the world outside or around their device screens. Conrad dispels each with equal ease: this young man is bright, engaging, and above all, here to help… and all at the rate of a plate of cookies.

To learn more about Senior Technology Services, or to request its services, visit www.srtechserv.com