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Joining Senior Centers by Skype

By Anne Tergesen

Due to chronic health conditions, Milton Greidinger, 88, rarely leaves his Queens, N.Y. apartment these days. But yesterday, the former salesman for Korvette's department store attended a current events class at the Benjamin Rosenthal Senior Center in Flushing, N.Y., where he debated the intricacies of NATO's plans to withdraw from Afghanistan and the Trayvon Martin case—all without leaving his home.

Thanks to the Rosenthal Center's "virtual senior center," Mr. Greidinger and two other home-bound adults joined the current events class using specially-equipped desktop computers that allow them to see, hear, and speak remotely with classmates and instructors.

Mr. Greidinger uses the technology—provided by Microsoft, the New York City Department for the Aging, and Selfhelp Community Services, a nonprofit that operates the Rosenthal Center—to participate in a variety of events. Over the holidays, he attended the Center's Hanukkah party. In October, he testified before the New York City Council's Aging Committee about the virtual senior center—again, via Skype. Mr. Greidinger and the 14 others enrolled in the virtual program can also participate in armchair yoga, art history, and Tai Chi, among other classes at the Rosenthal Center.

Mr. Greidinger's latest virtual endeavor takes place on Mondays at 4:30 p.m., when he spends an hour listening—via Skype—to a third grader read. The boy

"meets" with Mr. Greidinger from the Queens Library, where he attends an after-school literacy program. Because the child has trouble reading, he benefits from reading aloud to an adult, says Scott Code, program director for client centered technologies at Selfhelp.

For the sponsors of these Skype-based programs the goal is simple: To help "home bound seniors have more civic engagement," says Mr. Code.

Selfhelp's vice president of Senior Communities, Leo Asen, says the nonprofit—which provides affordable housing, home care, and senior centers, among other services—has plans to expand the virtual senior center. In the short-run, the goal is to provide 300 home-bound seniors who live in New York City with the equipment they would need to dial-in—via Skype—to programs at about 20 senior centers in the city. Eventually, the goal is to take the concept nationwide, says Mr. Asen, who is looking for angel investors.

SelfHelp also has plans to expand the Skype-based literacy program, perhaps as soon as this summer. "There are several more students who need assistance," says Mr. Code.

Mr. Greidinger, in his New York City Council testimony, said the virtual senior center has transformed his life. "Before this project, I was bored to death," he says. "I was just waiting for my time to finish. Now all of a sudden, I'm wide awake. I'm alive again."