

ABHOW Words

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Residents Stretch Minds Through Brain Fitness



Residents power up their minds in the Brain Fitness Program at Grand Lake Gardens.

Joy Aprá is a little tired, but it's a good tired. The 83-year-old has just finished an hour-long cognitive training session at Piedmont Gardens in Oakland, Calif., and she is stimulated. She finds the daily, eight-week Brain Fitness Program from Posit Science so rewarding, in fact, that she's taking it for the third time.

"I am aware the changes of age can make you not as sharp as you want to be," says Aprá, who has lived at the retirement community for nearly two years. "At this age, I don't want to lose any more than I have already lost." The Brain Fitness Program helps keep her mind alert, she says. "We're very fortunate to have it here."

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She's not the only one to think so. Her husband, Dan Aprá, who is 91, also took the computer-based class, which builds on "brain plasticity" – the brain's ability to rewire itself at any age. The exercises, which gradually increase in difficulty and calibrate to your individual level, improve the brain's speed of processing and accuracy for improved memory. American Baptist Homes of the West is so impressed by the program's outcomes that the company will soon offer the class at every one of its continuing care communities.

Participants report it helps them listen better, keep up with conversations, and feel more engaged with others. Some say the course helps them remember better, do jigsaws and crossword puzzles more easily, and generally feel sharper and more focused.

People with no computer skills discover they can comfortably control a mouse. "They tell their grandkids," says Elizabeth Chamish, director of programs at Piedmont Gardens. "It has given some of them the confidence to attain more computer skills."

Adnan Hasan, executive director of nearby Grand Lake Gardens, notes that many residents there are high achievers. The program, he says, makes them feel engaged and challenged.

As baby boomers age, many worry about losing their mental edge. Conventional wisdom among scientists has been that the brain's decline was irreversible once it began. But Dr. Michael Merzenich of the University of California at San Francisco and other neuroscientists have discovered that, with training, the brain can retain – even regain – cognitive abilities. Merzenich's Posit Science company recently presented a study at the Society for Neuroscience annual conference that showed that those who completed the Brain Fitness Program made remarkable gains in memory and other cognitive abilities – equivalent, on

average, to 10-plus years of improvement.

The National Institutes of Health also recently determined that mental exercise sessions can have lasting benefits for older adults. NIH's large, carefully controlled ACTIVE study, the first of its kind, found that such exercises can delay a decline in thinking skills and possibly help retain the ability to perform everyday activities.

The program trains you to listen more intently, says Joy Aprá. "I found out that I don't listen too well. I have gotten mad at it sometimes, but then I realized it was helping me sharpen up."

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Mildred Wong (foreground) and Florence Lebbert participate in the eight-week session at Grand Lake Gardens.

Some exercises, she says, tell a story in sections and then ask detailed questions. Others call for careful differentiation among sounds or require you to follow, in order, a series of requests.

One of Aprá's favorites is similar to the game Concentration. "The goal is both memory – to remember what was hidden – and to see that there's a system to it." It can be frustrating, she says, but when she gets it, it's fun.



Marcella Van Dalen (foreground) and Esther Lum of Grand Lake Gardens listen to the program's questions then respond with a click of the mouse.

In 2003, Piedmont Gardens served as a testing site when Merzenich and his team were developing the Brain Fitness Program. "There was lots of interest in helping because lots of the residents are former academics," Chamish says. "We had 12 to 14 residents who helped develop the program. People seemed so interested that we pursued it."

In 2005, Piedmont Gardens became one of the first communities in the nation to implement the full program and make it available to its residents. Their enthusiasm and the clear benefits for resident quality of life inspired another ABHOW community, The

Terraces of Los Gatos, to follow suit. In October, ABHOW began phasing in the program at its other continuing care retirement communities. Its affordable housing communities also have the option of offering it, and Tahoe Senior Plaza has become the first of those to get it up and running.

The program is one facet of the holistic approach ABHOW takes to wellness and fitness, says Paul Jepson, assistant vice president of care services. "We

are looking at each aspect of what could be considered wellness – biological, spiritual, social, physical, intellectual," he says.

ABHOW chose the Brain Fitness Program, which Hasan says they found far superior to other programs, because of the positive impact it could have on residents' well-being, self-esteem and ability to thwart cognitive decline.

The class also has the potential to boost social interaction, which itself helps fend off memory loss, according to aging experts.

"It is a real bonding thing to have done this much work," Chamish says of the program. "Residents who didn't know each other do now. There's a social plus to going through the class, even if they're not in the same class."

Aprá can vouch for that. Among other benefits, the class is beginning to help her remember people's names more easily. And talking about the program with another participant has blossomed into a new friendship, she says. "It's very good for people moving into a retirement home."

Joe Gerardi is ABHOW's vice president for information technology. He leads a team of eight engineers at the corporate office in Pleasanton and oversees the work of seven technicians in the continuing care retirement communities. Gerardi joined ABHOW in 2006 after 26 years with Hewlett-Packard. He "sat down" with ABHOW Words Editor Daniel Pryfogle – an electronic interview, naturally – to discuss the work of ABHOW IT.



Q and A

Information technology isn't the first thing people think about when it comes to retirement communities. But clearly that's changing. How is technology reshaping senior living?

There are three areas where technology comes into play: First, technology that allows the staff to support the business. This includes things like normal business systems – PCs, word processing, e-mail, telephone systems, timecards, cell phones, and HR systems come to mind.

Second, technology specific to our CCRCs, such as clinical systems, billing systems, systems that talk to Medicare, video surveillance systems, anti-wandering systems, nurse call systems with pendants, wireless computers in the health center, and touch-screen data collection.

Third, technology services for the residents themselves. Although we have an uneven implementation, we have family video conferencing about to be installed, cable TV systems with CCRC events and classes listed, sometimes phone systems and PC networking, Posit Science [see cover story], and resident computer labs.

What big projects are you and your team working on right now?

Most of the projects are on the business

side. We're upgrading older infrastructure, building redundant networks with satellite backup, creating SharePoint Servers for the functions with HR being the first, and upgrading and replacing telephone systems. We'll have to replace almost one-third of all our PCs next year. We're weeks away from finishing a nurse call selection system so all new construction and major renovations will have a standard nurse call system that can be managed from any other community if necessary.

"SharePoint Servers"? Please explain that one.

A SharePoint Server is a Microsoft Product that can "help improve organizational effectiveness by providing comprehensive content management and enterprise search, accelerating shared business processes,

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and facilitating information-sharing across boundaries for better business insight.” In English, it’s an easy way for departments like HR and Finance to publish information and an easy way for employees to search for and quickly find the information they need to do their jobs. HR is looking at self-service applications on SharePoint so people can do things themselves without needing to call HR so often.

And why do the PCs have to be replaced?

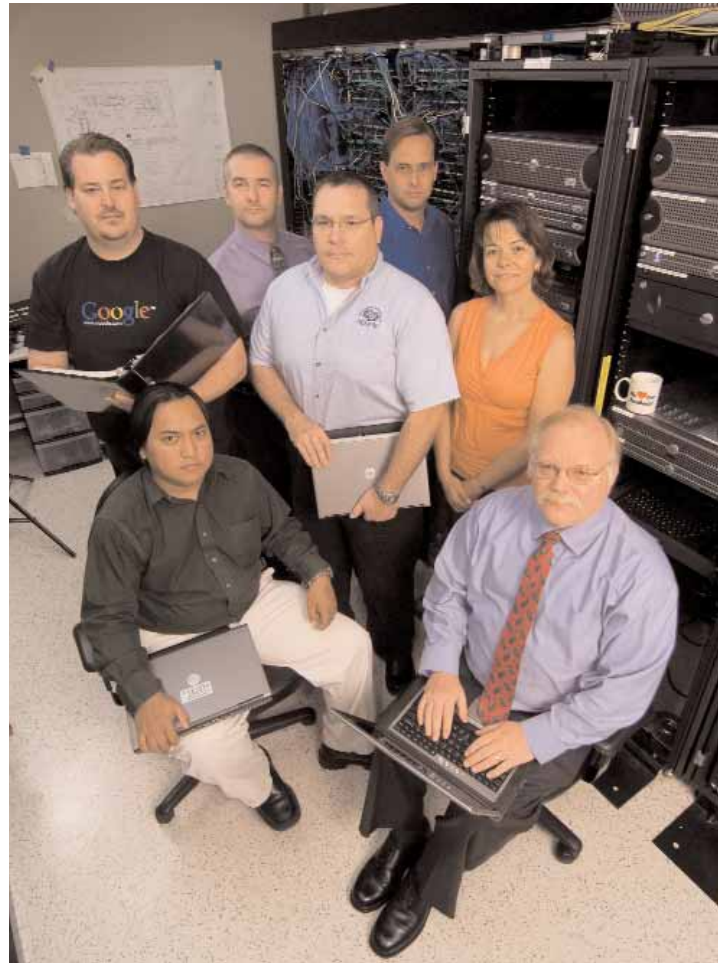
Every year a new PC is twice as fast as the previous year. This means that PCs bought four years ago are one-sixteenth the speed and capacity of one purchased today – for the same price. Newer applications require more horsepower from PCs than before, and as a result, some of the older machines seem SLOW. Additionally, PCs fall off warranty and become more difficult to support as they age.

How will all these projects benefit ABHOW employees, residents, and the company as a whole?

Yikes. Well, if the technology runs smoothly and easily, it leaves more room for our employees to spend more time with residents in a hands-on way. It should also free up the techs in the community to teach more classes and do more technology coaching for both residents and staff.

It sounds like business or operational needs drive a lot of the technology changes. Where does consumer demand come into play? Are residents asking for new technology or, indirectly, asking for a level of service that requires new technology?

PointClickCare brought PCs to the skilled nursing centers and to people who never used computers before. That’s fueling growth in the employee space. As for resident demands, they



The ABHOW IT team (clockwise, from bottom left): Genesis Esteban, Mike Wilcoxon, Brett Ortega, John Ortiz, Garet Jones, Funda Erdin, and Joe Gerardi.

are still small, but each season sees more technology-savvy residents entering the communities. They want to know why they can’t do the things they were able to do at home when they move into a community. Quality of life is always on ABHOW’s mind, and things that increase contact with the resident’s family, like video conferencing, are helpful. Programs that assist with elder issues, such as brain exercise with Posit Science, are important also. Over time, I would hope that many of the aging-in-place technologies being developed by companies such as Phillips and others could be deployed in residential living to increase the time residents spend there before moving to assisted living or other care levels. Our friends in Marketing are always looking for differentiators for ABHOW vs. other communities, and technology helps there as well.

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Beauty is not just on the outside.” That’s what comes to mind when I think of Tahoe Senior Plaza. The Plaza is not only beautiful to look at – being set in the wooded area of South Lake Tahoe – but the residents are, too.

Many residents have been here since the doors opened in 1999. They make the Plaza one very special place to live, work or visit.

Having the advantage of being a smaller 45-apartment community allows the residents to become very close and have a real concern for each other. The residents have the true neighborly spirit and help each other in many ways.

Even though we have some very ill residents, their spirit of endurance is endearing. Residents who do not drive and have no families have had neighbors give them rides to the hospital, drug store, and just out for fun.

The residents are very motivated and excited about getting involved in many areas of the wider community. Some of our residents volunteer their time to Barton Nursing Home, The Cancer Society, Department of Human Services, and Senior Center Bus Driving. Others recycle plastics and volunteer at The Attic Thrift Store.

Two residents this year are team leaders for the annual Cancer Research Drive in South Lake Tahoe.

Their enthusiasm for the project has been quite contagious and has encouraged other residents to get involved.

Many of our residents still have the desire to learn and explore new ideas and adventures. We are just completing the Brain Fitness Program from Posit Science for memory enhancement. The residents, many of whom had never been on a computer, enjoyed learning the computer basics and taking this course.

Tahoe Senior Plaza is very much alive with the sound of laughter in the halls and a spirit of friendship making every new resident feel right at home. As resident Ruth Paine puts it, “Life is a gift; open the package.”

Shelia Cooper is administrator of Tahoe Senior Plaza.



Alie Buck and daughter Gail (above) enjoy the beautiful outdoors at Tahoe Senior Plaza. Lorayne Taylor and LaNelle Fowler (photo left) exemplify the community’s neighborly spirit.

Threatened by the Angora fire that destroyed 254 homes near South Lake Tahoe in late June, the staff and 45 residents of ABHOW's Tahoe Senior Plaza responded as a community.

"Tahoe Senior Plaza residents joined together and maintained a watchful eye for each other," said Administrator Shelia Cooper. "Oddly enough, we had just had our yearly fire drill the week before the fire, so safety was still on the minds of everyone."

The fire stopped a mile and a half from Tahoe Senior Plaza. Yet in the early hours of the weeklong blaze that burned 3,100 acres, the community was uncertain whether it would be evacuated.

The sky was dark on Sunday, June 24, the first afternoon of the fire, and smoke was thick around the community, Cooper said. By the third day, the fire was still out of control and advancing toward Tahoe Senior Plaza.

"Tahoe Boulevard became unbelievably jammed with cars trying to flee the area," Cooper said. "Our residents became anxious on Tuesday, but still they remained a team and all worked together in the midst of fear and chaos."

The community wasn't alone. Ancel Romero, ABHOW's senior vice president for affordable housing, was in close contact with Cooper throughout the crisis. When air quality became a concern, Suzanne Saucier, ABHOW's assistant vice president for affordable housing development, came up with the idea of securing HEPA filters and rushed to meet Cooper in Carson City to complete the purchase.

Dan Metz, Tahoe Senior Plaza's maintenance technician, held the fort while Cooper gathered additional provisions. It was only upon Cooper's return that Metz hurried to his mother, who lives in Tahoe Keys, which was then in the direct path of the rapidly approaching fire.

Help arrived from elsewhere. Jean McGill, ABHOW's regional nurse consultant, drove all the way from The Terraces of Los Gatos on the fifth day of the fire. She comforted residents, taking blood pressure and monitoring their vital signs. Travis Hanna, ABHOW's compliance manager for affordable housing, rushed to the community to support Cooper. Romero noted a defining moment of Hanna's care and commitment: waking up one morning to realize he had slept on a lobby sofa, then jumping right back into the fray.

"The residents bonded with these two and told me how they appreciated them for coming to help," said Cooper, adding that others in the ABHOW family reached out to the community. "I received many e-mails and calls from staff and co-workers with resident concerns and inquiries about the fire."



Jean McGill, ABHOW's regional nurse consultant, takes a resident's blood pressure amid the crisis.

The response highlighted what ABHOW is all about, according to Romero. "Perhaps it takes an emergency to underscore the self-evident," he said. "ABHOW's cup overflows with awe-inspiring resources, a culture of compassion held sacred by most, and people of extraordinary courage, talent and grace."



What do you want your department to be known for in ABHOW?

First of all, that we keep the business running and protect the informational assets of the company. That's a basic requirement of IT, and we're getting that under control.

Secondly, that we are a source of good ideas about the application of technology to business and CCRC problems.

Finally, as we get the infrastructure under control, we'd like to branch into more systems and services for our residents. More video with families and Internet access for those who want it. Systems to learn more about our residents' health and safety, but in a completely passive way and with resident permission. Technology that will allow residents to stay independent as long as possible.

Since IT runs lean, most of our energy is spent on the more mundane but essential tasks of running networks, running accounting and HR, tracking timecards and other back office functions. By getting these tasks under control and managed, we'll free up time to contribute more directly to resident health, safety, and overall quality of life in ABHOW communities.

ABHOW Words

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“American Baptist Homes of the West, as an expression of Christian mission, seeks to enhance the independence, well-being and security of older people through the provision of housing, health care and supportive services.”

