

Online, 'a Reason to Keep on Going'

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

Like many older people, Paula Rice of Island City, Ky., has grown isolated in recent years. Her four grown children live in other states, her two marriages ended in divorce, and her friends are scattered. Most days, she does not see another person.

But Ms. Rice, 73, is far from lonely. Housebound after suffering a heart attack two years ago, she began visiting the social networking sites Eons.com, an online community for aging baby boomers, and PoliceLink.com (she is a former police dispatcher). Now she spends up to 14 hours a day in online conversations.

"I was dying of boredom," she said. "Eons, all by its lonesome, gave me a reason to keep on going."

That more and more people in Ms. Rice's generation are joining networks like Eons, Facebook and MySpace is hardly news. Among older people who went online last year, the number visiting social networks grew almost twice as fast as the overall rate of Internet use among that group, according to the media measurement company comScore. But now researchers who focus on aging are studying the phenomenon to see whether the networks can provide some of the benefits of a group of friends, while being much easier to assemble and maintain.

"One of the greatest challenges or losses that we face as older adults, frankly, is not about our health, but it's actually about our social network deteriorating on us, because our friends get sick, our spouse passes away, friends pass away, or we move," said Joseph F. Coughlin, director of the AgeLab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"The new future of old age is about staying in society, staying in the workplace and staying very connected," he added. "And technology is going to be a very big part of that, because the new reality is, increasingly, a virtual reality. It provides a way to make new connections, new friends and new senses of purpose."

About one-third of people 75 and older live alone, according to a 2009 study from AARP. In response to the growing number of older Americans, the National Institute on Aging is awarding at least \$10 million in grants for researchers who examine social neuroscience and its effect on aging.

Online networks may offer older people "a place where they do feel empowered, because they can make these connections and they can talk to people without having to ask a friend or a family member

for one more thing," said Antonina Bambina, a sociologist at the University of Southern Indiana who wrote the book "Online Social Support" (Cambria, 2007).

For the family members of older people, online social networks can provide a bit of relief. Chris McWade of Franklin, Mass., the youngest member of a big family, recently helped his parents, his grandparents and his uncle move to retirement homes. He said he spent two or three years "just flying cross-country, holding a lot of hands" and seeing the isolation and depression that came with aging.

That sparked the idea for MyWay Village, a social network based in Quincy, Mass. Mr. McWade helped found it in 2006 and now sells it to retirement homes.

It has just completed pilot programs in several nursing homes in Illinois and Massachusetts, and Mr. McWade says he has agreements to expand to several other homes.

Two and a half years ago, Howe Allen, a real estate broker in Boston, moved his parents to the River Bay Club, a retirement home in Quincy, Mass., that uses MyWay.

His mother died soon after, but his father, Carl, was able to start making friends and share stories on MyWay. The older man had never used a computer, but picked it up quickly; the software includes computer training sessions. And after he died last December, a memorial service at the home included photographs he had uploaded to MyWay, excerpts from memoirs he had posted and eulogies from friends he had made through the site.

"It was as moving a day as I can ever remember," Howe Allen said. "It's more than just the computer. It affected him in ways that are so far from the electronic age. It allowed this person to grow at an age where you assume most people stop growing."

On a recent Monday, Neil Sullivan, a regional manager for MyWay, stood in front of a group of about 20 River Bay Club residents in the home's library.

He came prepared with slides and speeches, but mostly the group just wanted to talk about their lives. When Mr. Sullivan showed a photograph of a 1950 Chevrolet, one resident said, "I had a '57 Chevy," and another responded, "Mine was a '49 Chevy." A man in a chartreuse sweater who had been quiet for some time added, "The best car I ever had was a Dodge Business Coupe."



FAR FROM LONELY Paula Rice, 73, had been "dying of boredom" before discovering social networking sites. She spends up to 14 hours a day on the sites.

Sarah Hoit, a co-founder of MyWay and its chief executive, said that for older people, learning to get online was not an

Outside of the weekly sessions, River Bay residents use the site to post stories like "My Life as a Nurse" or "I Worked at the Howard Johnson in Quincy." Sunny Walker, 89, who refused to use an electric typewriter when she was a school secretary because she hated technology so much, now plays games and sends friends messages through the site.

"I'm telling you, it's the best thing for seniors," she said. "It challenges their mind, that's what it does. It challenged mine."

Some research suggests that loneliness can hasten dementia, and Dr. Nicholas A. Christakis, an internist and social scientist at Harvard, says he is considering research on whether online social connections can help delay dementia, as traditional ones have been found to do in some studies.

"Online social networks realize an ancient propensity we all have to connect with others," he said.

The propensity may be ancient, but the means are not. Mollie Bourne, a golf course owner who lives in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, half of the year, logs on to Facebook a few times a week. She likes to browse through her grandchildren's posts and photos, even the ones taken at bars and parties that are hardly the sort that people expect their grandmothers to see.

"For heaven's sakes, we all acted like that in college," she said. "That's one thing you get with your 76 years. I've been around. I've seen it all. It takes a lot to shock me."