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EPISODE NAME: The e-Vermont Community Broadband Project

Today on Across the Fence: the digital age has information at our fingertips. We are encouraged to do everything from our banking to our socializing online. That makes digital literacy a key skill for the 21st century. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. For many of us using a computer and the Internet is second nature but that's not the case for everyone. So for the past two years the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project has helped Vermonters navigate the online world. The project has reached out to thousands of Vermonters and dozens of communities to help break down the digital divide and provide digital literacy education. Joining me this afternoon to discuss some of the online tools and resources that are now available to Vermonters to learn to use the Internet is e-Vermont Project Director Helen Labun Jordan. Thanks for being with us.

Helen.: Thank you for having us on your show.

Judy.: The first question I have is someone has gone this long without using a computer or jumping online why should they start now?

Helen.: Part of it is what you mentioned in the beginning there are just so many things going on online right now. To what you mentioned I could add job applications online college classes online applying for gov't benefits online. There's so many things now that are only available online or mostly available online but there's also the more positive side with so many things online no matter what your interest is you can probably find a tool online. e-Vermont has one on one instruction with Vermonters who are learning to use the Internet for the first time. Folks usually go straight for looking at the best cabbage roll recipe or following their sports teams online or shopping for Christmas ornaments which are very popular during the holidays. So there are many interests that can be met with online tools.

Judy.: And there is the conception that people spend way too much time on line as far as living their lives virtually through a computer but that that's not really the case.

Helen.: That's right there's two sides of the spectrum the people who don't want to touch a computer and people don't want to leave the computer but those are extremes I think that most folks are like me. I looked up where to hear local music or where to go hiking online. Is not that I am living my life on the computer it's helping me get out and do more things.
Judy.: There's all kinds of information available so can you tell me a little bit about what some of the resources that e-Vermont offers to people who have never navigated the web before?

Helen.: Sure we have resources both for folks who haven't been on line before and for folks who are helping people get online. Many of us have been in the position of helping a friend or neighbor or family member learn to navigate online and it can be a great experience or can be frustrating. So we have resources to help with both sides of that equation. e-Vermont makes most of these resources available on our web site which is www.e4vt.org I can show you a quick overview of what some of that is. One thing you'll notice right off as I said the tools for learning to use the Internet are found online. If you don't know how to get online then that's going to be a problem so a lot of our work focuses on what we call threshold skills. Those of the things folks need to learn to feel comfortable getting to those online sites that can provide tutorials and provide tools for learning more about the computer that's the real emphasis of e-Vermont. If you look of the web site here this is the e-Vermont home page. We have a lot of different things on here not just the tools that I'm about to show you. If you go to the toolkit section you'll see that we have a variety of different tool kits including the one that I'm going to show you here which is Internet basics. You can see straight off we have a couple of different audiences here. Internet basics for beginners and instructors and also things like web design. One thing you'll find that I won't show here because it involves downloading a document is a printed manual that goes over the basics. What that really does is has a concrete object with graphics that are very easy to follow that can show folks different components of the computer. What's on the screen what is the address bar what are these icons.

Judy.: It's like learning another language really.

Helen.: It really is this learning another language and luckily as long as you can get online you always have the translation dictionaries close at hand so you can find more information. If we go to the basics for beginners site you can see some of what I'm talking about for instructions that are online. Here getting back to your point about learning a different language we've pulled out three tutorials online that we feel are laid out in a very simple way that's intuitive for folks to follow if their new to using the Internet. Those are these three links here. If you just go to—I will show you what one looks like this is the BBC its great everything spelled with British spelling and everyone has a British accent. Here you can see it's blocked out very simply. You can click on using your computer it's a big block to click on. Using the web and different levels of basics here. The other great thing about these web sites is we won't play this but I will show you we have a lot of fun interactive components so it's not like you're going to a classroom and sitting there studying like you're back in school. There are lots of fun things you can do online and you can do as part of these tutorials.

Judy.: So teaches you what the different keys do and how use them?

Helen.: Exactly and using a mouse which is often a difficult thing to do if you haven't been doing all your life.

Judy.: You right click you left click you click twice.

Helen.: Exactly where did the cursor go? Even I find myself in a situation. One thing that I feel we do need to mention and I know this is also a concern for folks going online is the idea of
Internet safety which is why we have Internet safety as part of our basics toolkit. We work with digital witch for example which is a program that goes to elementary schools to work on online tools and using computers and they always start the curriculum with digital citizenship Internet safety being safe navigating the online world and e-Vermont definitely feels that a very important starting place. We do have here a list of questions to consider with Internet safety. Resources that the Vermont Partners have created as well as a long list of recommended links. Here were looking for things like when is it OK to share information what is a secure web site what are some typical scams that you see. If you get contacted and you don't know whether this is a legitimate contact where can you go to find out if this is OK to share your information? Being online is generally safe as long as you know the basic guidelines for navigating that online world and these links will certainly help folks do that.

Judy.: Because I think a lot of people assume that if it’s on the Internet and must be true or safe.

Helen.: That would not be true however. Luckily again back to the idea that the translation dictionaries always there if you can get on line it's really easy to check things. It's really easy to check facts to check rumors that you hear online to check messages that you get online as long as you remember to do that.

Judy.: What are some of the things that you do to help communities and individuals who are just getting started? Do make an appointment to come in and sit down and you spend time with them?

Helen.: We have several different approaches. We've partnered with the Community College of Vermont as well as the Department of Libraries which are two of the e-Vermont partners to develop some great programming. We find it's the one on one interaction that work the best both because you can give someone the time needed to help them feel comfortable on line and go and learn more. Also because you can tailor it to what their interests are like what we're saying in the very beginning. That's what people are going online they have a particular need or a particular interest. So we have programs like the Internet interns program where we put Vermont State Colleges students in libraries for set hours each week and it's just open help hours. Anyone can come in with any question and get it answered. We also have a program that will work with people who want to help others learn to use the Internet and computers. Maybe are not going to be a fulltime Internet instructor but you have someone in your life or see people during the course of work who you can help get those thresholds skills that we mentioned before. The ones that will give someone the confidence to the get to those online tutorials and learn more using online tools. It's called the I Connect Program. We'll work with people who want to have those skills working with online beginners. Those are two of our major projects. We also have webinars on basics we've provided workshops in e-Vermont Communities and we also have the Digital Wish program which focuses on fourth through sixth grade so the in-school learning using online tools and integrating that into education.

Judy.: Which is great for the younger generation and I think some people just assume you can have your kids show you how to navigate the Internet but they move in such a different pace it so quick that it's hard to follow.

Helen.: It's a different pace in their often using it for different things. There so many different ways to use the Internet and to use those online tools and frankly a lot of gadgets as well. It's important to have someone with that broad perspective who can work with older learners to get
them the information that they need which may not be the same as the information a 4th grader is using.

Judy.: What if I don't have high speed Internet home?

Helen.: Of course it would be great if everyone had high speed Internet at home and there is actually a website broadbandvt.org that has information about where high speed is available and how to get it home. That is an excellent option. There are usually other options however in a community. For example the public library often has high speed connections as well as equipment. Or if you have a laptop or other device that can get online you can look for hot spots which are wireless connections at say your local coffee shop. And sometimes even have wireless Internet zones anywhere in downtown you can get online if you have a laptop to connect.

Judy.: Is really important to point out that this is for people's personal individual usage. You don't have to go online to that should expect you're going to be buying everything online or you have to know everything all at once is really what you want to get out of it.

Helen.: Everyone uses the Internet differently everyone has things they prefer doing offline. I will always shop that the local farmers market I am not going to order my specialty foods online that's just what I prefer on the other hand I will do research on line I use the Internet all the time for work. It's a matter of setting what your needs are first and then matching the tools to it. If you try to learn every tool out there you'll never leave your computer. Is not possible to keep up. It's a question first of what you need and watch are looking for and then going online to find it.

Judy.: Can you go through a couple of the basics again as far as what these different programs that you have shown folks?

Helen.: Sure so the different programs we have for Internet basics. Again there all at: e4vt.org include programs for reaching those online tutorials they include programs for one on one work with different age ranges and then if you get out to different areas and go to the toolkit section on our site you'll see this illustrated that they're different forms of basics like basics for businesses which SBDC small business development center one of our partners will do. Basics for education there's basics for municipal governments so we also cover a wide range of sectors with those Internet basics which are not going to be the same necessarily for what you and I need to know as home users.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about some of the feedback that you've received?

Helen.: It's been great on several levels. The way the e-Vermont program was set up this to work intensively in 24 communities. That's when we got to pilot programs and make adjustments. So for example the Internet interns program that I described with those college students in libraries providing help hours really came in response to what we're hearing both from public librarians and people who were going to our workshops saying we need one on one instruction and we needed to be available on a regular basis. On that level we worked with the feedback to develop our programs. On another level what we've been hearing is that the e-Vermont project speaks to a segment of the population who hasn't necessarily had programs available before. There's been an assumption I think that either you've been on line for the past decade or you haven't been online for the past decade and if you haven't been you're not going to
get online. Which is completely false. There are lots of people who want to get online and are looking for a how to get a foothold on the digital world and there's also folks who find himself simply needing to get online now because of some of those applications we described before like applying for jobs and job skills.

Judy.: I know you have an upcoming conference to tell us about?

Helen.: We do for anyone who wants to explore these bigger questions of digital literacy or basic needs for learning online tools May 8 we have a conference happening on Vermont’s Digital Future. Again going back to that web site e4vt.org you can find a link to get all the information you need and to register. It's going to be a great day full of discussion full of looking at what do online tools mean for Vermonters and four Vermont communities. It should be a lot of fun.

Judy.: I want to thank you for joining me today.

Helen.: Thank you for having e-Vermont on your show.

Judy.: Sure. That’s our program for today. I’m Judy Simpson we’ll see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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