

Staying in touch

Long-distance chats, face-to-face via Skype

By David Bertola, Buffalo Business First

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When Gary Trombley of Port Charlotte, Fla., wants to talk to his 88-year-old mother, Eleanor Trombley, a resident at Brompton Heights Inc. assisted-living facility in Williamsville, a long-distance phone call might not be an option anymore.

That's because to make calls, Gary and his mother now use Skype, software that lets users make free video calls over an Internet connection. Cameras on computers at each site provide video so the callers can see each other.

Gary suggested a few months ago to Brompton Heights' recreation director, Helen Kurzdorfer, that Skype be used as a way for out-of-town relatives to connect with residents there. He said he wants to be able to see and talk to his mother at least twice a week.

"I prefer this to talking on a cell phone," he said.

Communications director Virginia McAuliffe said residents' families also are welcome to use Skype to talk with staff about issues related to care or the facility.

Since she joined the company earlier this year, McAuliffe said, she has noticed a push within the company to use it. Skype is used by Brompton Heights and other Hamister Group Inc. properties throughout the country to facilitate meetings and administer training sessions, she said.

One particular session about Facebook would have required her to travel to a company property in Potsdam, N.Y. However, with Skype, Potsdam staff can see and hear McAuliffe on one-half of the screen. She can refer to Facebook on the other half as she walks them through adding photos or other updates.



Hoping for word to spread

Kurzdorfer said of the approximately 160 residents, Trombley is among four who have used it so far. Hopefully, word will spread and within a month as many as 20 residents could be using it. Kurzdorfer administers training sessions, and residents schedule times with her to get on the computer to make their calls.

On July 16, Eleanor's daughter and son-in-law, Jean and John Moulin, watched as Gary and Mom tried to get the conversation going. Some bugs needed to be worked out on Gary's computer. At times he could be heard but not seen, and during the conversation his microphone wasn't picking up his voice the whole time.

But all four, plus Gary's son Matthew, were able to say hello, crack jokes and discuss an upcoming visit by the Florida-based Trombleys to Western New York at Thanksgiving.

"How are you doing, Grandma?" Matt asked.

"I'm doing fine," she replied.

As the conversation wrapped up, everyone got ready to say goodbye, Eleanor looked into the monitor and blew a kiss.