



THIS WEEK



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Communities help nurture passion for lifelong learning

By PATRICIA BEGGS
Rochester Business Journal
May 7, 2010

From presentations on local history, seminars on wellness or documentaries on famous musicians and composers, residents at retirement communities are always taking in new information.

"There's something for everyone," says Stephanie Briggs, director of cultural arts at Cloverwood Senior Living in Pittsford. "Our goal is to make sure that Cloverwood is more stimulating than your average senior community."

Briggs says most of the learning experiences at Cloverwood are born of ideas from residents.

"I come out of the meetings with a list of ideas and start making calls," Briggs says. "The residents have so many suggestions that we usually fill the calendar a couple months in advance."

Cloverwood is an independent retirement community for people age 62 and older. Residents at Cloverwood participate in a variety of educational opportunities, including gardening, nature hikes with an expert guide, comparative religion discussions, and presentations on travel and history.

Residents also weigh in on profound subjects in a series called Great Decisions, which is sponsored by the Foreign Policy Association. It requires reading a specific book, watching the accompanying video, doing personal research and then discussing international topics of interest in a group setting.

The topics are very stimulating, Briggs says. Discussions have included issues like world peace and genocide in Africa.

For the most part, Briggs says, residents are more interested in being educated about issues and history than in learning new skills.

"Our residents don't just want to be entertained; they really want to learn," she says.

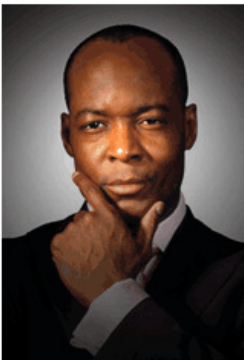
One area where retirees are more likely to implement what they learn is maintaining their health and independence. Cloverwood has roughly four health-related speakers per month on a range of topics.

Like Cloverwood, Charlotte Harbortown Homes, an independent senior living center with two high-rise locations in Rochester, also offers residents opportunities to improve their health.

"We have health fairs and Red Cross ready seminars, as well as monthly blood pressure checks," says Kathleen Lia, resident program director at Charlotte Harbortown Homes.

Lia says many of the learning opportunities at Charlotte Harbortown Homes also are suggested by residents.

"People come up to me every day with ideas, and if they're reasonable we try to do it," she says.




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Popular offerings are dance lessons, including ballroom and line dancing. Lia says these lessons usually culminate with a big event such as a "senior" prom or a hoedown.

"I think these events are more popular because it gives the residents a chance to come together and share what they've learned," she says.

Participation is not always as easy to achieve, Lia notes. For many residents, helpful educational activities must be planned around more popular activities.

"I try to have presentation days once or twice a month," she explains. "That way I can plan to have a few educational presentations followed up with maybe a Wii bowling event."

Doing so encourages residents to participate in programs that are beneficial to them.

Some of the seminars the center has offered in the past include instruction on recognizing scams and on using the Internet and e-mail.

Michael Seelig, vice president of housing and administrator at Cherry Ridge, a St. Ann's community in Webster, says he is amazed not only by the myriad interests that residents have but also by the wealth of knowledge and talent they represent.

Cherry Ridge, a senior retirement community with housing for independent seniors and assisted living and memory services, offers residents educational series on wellness, nutrition and technological advances in medicine.

The community also offers historical and travel presentations that are assisted by the residents.

Speakers often are brought in, sometimes through resident contacts. The visitors may include doctors from local hospitals who address subjects relevant to the senior population, like arthritis and stroke prevention.

Cherry Ridge draws on a committee of staff members and residents for topics of interest. It then seeks out experts to come in and discuss them. Seelig says the community operates on what it calls person-centered care.

"We really try to customize everything we do, where the residents are an integral part of the planning of the events and topics," he says. "So it's not just us teaching the residents new skills; it's also the residents bringing to each other the skills that they've learned in their lives."

Interests range from woodworking, travel and history to health care and technology, says Seelig, who is most impressed by what the residents offer each other.

"Sometimes we may feel that it's us giving them different services, but the residents' willingness to give of themselves is truly amazing," Seelig says. "They do want to learn new things, but we need to not lose sight that they are a major resource for us to learn from."

An example of that is 85-year-old Gordon Jarvis, who has lived at Cherry Ridge with his wife for five years and is very active in the educational and cultural activities. As a physicist retired from Eastman Kodak Co.'s research unit, Jarvis has a lot of experience to offer his community.

"My motto is 'I live here too,'" Jarvis says. "If I want to see something happen, I make sure it happens."

Jarvis, collaborating with some neighbors who are retired professors from Rochester Institute of Technology and Monroe Community College, has put together college-level courses on DVD with topics like earth science and geology or European art. He also has helped to develop shows about individual foreign countries, and they have evolved into festivals with days devoted to the countries of interest—their music, clothes and cuisine.

Jarvis has improved his own technology skills to help other residents put together multimedia presentations. He says part of his enjoyment is seeing the other residents enjoy them.

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Says Seelig: "It's amazing, watching these residents shine and teach us some of the things that they have experienced and learned."

Patricia Beggs is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

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