

Senior Lunch and More program to see much needed expansion

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Paul Goldblum and Mary Novello lean in so close when they talk, the orange sleeve of his shirt brushes up against her shoulder. Maybe they're sharing a secret — each of them slipping out the quiet, snickering kind of laugh only friends use during private jokes.

But it's more likely they're shifting closer together to hear better. They are 88 and 89, after all, and the cramped room at the Jewish Family and Community Services center is anything but spacious or quiet.

They meet here every Wednesday, along with about 140 other seniors in Naples, for the Lunch and More Program, a free luncheon for members of the senior center. Adding the three new members who joined the center that day, the total membership number tops 600 people.

It's no small wonder the center is in the process of expanding.

By Sept. 1, the center will total about 6,000 square feet on the first floor. The expansion will add necessary central space so more of the members can attend the luncheon.

The additions are a much-needed project, said Jaclynn Faffer, president and CEO of JFCS. Their membership is high, and they want to continue to accommodate as many seniors in Collier as possible.

For the seniors, the expansion will help benefit a center they consider vital to their happiness.

"This place gave me life again," Novello said.

A self-proclaimed avid dancer, Novello didn't know where to turn when she celebrated her 80th birthday and stopped dancing as often. "I felt lost. I said, 'now what am I going to do?' But this place opened up, and it made me feel important again."

Outside the white walls of the senior center, in the lobby of the JFCS, a raucous loud enough to be a cafeteria room filled with boisterous teenagers bubbles up and out the door.

Inside, steam curls out of silver trays in a buffet line. It's a room that smells of pasta, carrot cake and hot green beans. Notes from a piano sitting in the center of the room punctuate the endless conversations.

Bernice Thompson, 82, sits at a packed, round table surrounded by friends. She used to take the bus to get here, but it proved too slow for her. She needed to be at the center early enough to place reserved tags on seats for her friends.

"You must save seats," Thompson said with emphatic eyebrows arching. "There's so many people here now that you have to. (The lunch program) is special to all of us — the volunteers are wonderful, the food is very good, and it's a relaxing and comfortable place."

The volunteers are seniors themselves, said Faffer. She likes to joke that the only way she tells the difference between members and volunteers is by the bright blue T-shirts volunteers wear.

Sherry Pino wears one of those blue shirts, with pink glasses dangling from the collar. She's been a volunteer for about a year and has seen the program grow.

"We see the same faces come back week after week, and new faces too, because it's a social event," she said. "It like an extended family here and it's a pleasure to serve them, and welcome them and be a part of the day where they can get out and enjoy being here."

The center is funded 100 percent by the philanthropic dollar, Faffer said, and the lunch program and classes provided by the center are free for members who pay a \$15 annually to register with Collier's first senior center.

"The lunch program is what gives the seniors the camaraderie and friendship and socialization that they need," she said. "It's a lifeline. Seeing someone who came in the first day, looking around, kind of shy and uncomfortable, not used to being with people since her husband passed away years ago, and now to see her coming every week to meet with her friends, that's what makes it a lifeline."

Before lunch begins, Helen Waite, manager of the center, warms up the crowd with announcements, jokes and two verses of "You are My Sunshine."

Members at the table join in the song in the last few moments before tables are called up two at a time to line up for lunch.

They look around at each other. They sing, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.”

Smiles pop up on numerous faces — seeming to echo the friendships they’ve made and the community they’ve found — while their voices blend for the line:

“You make me happy when skies are gray.”

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