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SENIOR FITNESS

By Kevin Corbett

The banner hanging in the gym reflects the mood on the floor. "We don't stop exercising because we get old," it reads, "we get old because we stop exercising." To the class of about 40 believers shuffling their feet and clapping their hands in the Magnarelli Community Center at McChesney Park, 2300 Grant Blvd.

At McChesney Park, the city operates a variety of exercise classes for those 55 and older

The banner hanging in the gym reflects the mood on the floor. "We don't stop exercising because we get old," it reads, "we get old because we stop exercising." To the class of about 40 believers shuffling their feet and clapping their hands in the Magnarelli Community Center at McChesney Park, 2300 Grant Blvd., that message has been received loud and clear. Group leader Carol Fitzgerald demonstrates as she calls out the steps while classic such as "Locomotion" and "That'll Be The Day" provide the dancers' soundtrack.

The music movement group is among the wealth of senior programming available at the center every weekday sponsored by the Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs. The 20-year-old building hosts afternoon youth programs and evening adult basketball and volleyball leagues, but from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., seniors age 55 and older find a welcoming atmosphere and a full agenda, starting in the gym, which features a full-sized court with two baskets and folding bleachers. Energy-efficient fluorescent ceiling lights supplement natural light from two skylights, a recent upgrade financed with a grant through National Grid. Nearby are locker and shower facilities.

"Mondays and Wednesdays we have an outside instructor we hired and she offers an exercise with hand weights class for about an hour," says Tom White, the center's administrative officer. "Then she follows up with a music movement class, an aerobics-based class. Tuesdays and Thursdays, we run a yoga class in here and a body toning, strength-resistance type program. In addition to that, we have two days where seniors play volleyball, two days where seniors are playing basketball. One day there's a badminton group, another day we have a table tennis group that comes in."

Following the music movement program, many from the class gather in a small community room for a low-cost lunch of baked ham, au gratin potatoes, vegetables and fruit delivered by Catholic Charities and prepared in the commercialstyle, full kitchen with service window. The same room is used to host card games, coffee hours, community meetings, holiday parties and speakers on everything from defensive driving to crocheting.

The major goal of the center is to keep seniors healthy by keeping them active doing something they enjoy, from pumping iron to walking the perimeter of the gym to dancing. "As long as they keep moving, it's OK," says senior program coordinator Mimi Pavetto, "even if they're not doing the right steps." Pavetto leads yoga, body toning and strength training groups and coordinates bocce games in the summer. "I added a lot when I started here," she says. "I talk to them about safety, how not to get hurt if they fall."



The center promotes strength and balance that goes well beyond the physical for some of the regulars. "It was a lifesaver," says Syracusan Celine Nicholas, while stroking a gold ring she wears on a chain around her neck. "I lost my husband in 2010. In 2011 I went to volunteer at St. Joe's (Hospital) and I met a lady that came here. She told me I should come. It was a two-day defensive driving course. Then the last day Mimi passed out some fliers. She told me, 'Come tomorrow for yoga.' I almost didn't come, but I said if I didn't make it today, I'm not going to do it. I came to the yoga and enjoyed it and I came after that all the time."

Now a twice-a-week participant at the Magnarelli Center, Nicholas joined the music movement group and took a painting class. "The first year that my husband was gone, I wasted it at the mall," she says. "But this changed my life. I stay for the lunches, too."

Lunches are available on Mondays and Wednesdays, the only regular program for which there is a charge. "The fee for the lunch is \$2.75 to cover the cost that Catholic Charities incurs to provide it," White explains. "We are part of the county Office of Aging and Youth, a senior nutrition site."

Santina Bill, 88, of Syracuse has been going to McChesney for 26 years and she's planning to continue. "No. 1, it's close to my house," Bill explains. "No. 2, everybody is like a second family. One friend really goes way back, the rest of them maybe the last four or five years."

Bill usually visits McChesney three times a week, frequently joining in the power walking and yoga groups. "I've got my problems," she concedes, "but that's not going to stop me from coming here. You've gotta keep your mind going because if that's gone, your body's going with it."

While Dave Baker works out in the weight room, as he usually does three times a week, four friends unfold and assemble a table in the gym for a doubles match of table tennis. Paddle enthusiasts Peter Testa and Richard A. Domingue keep up a steady banter while warming up with one of the program's better athletes, former Syracuse University women's basketball coach Muriel Smith. "She plays ping-pong every year in the Senior Olympics, which is national," playing partner Philip Schuls says. "She's won national titles in her age group at the Senior Olympics."

The center's deceased namesake, Armond Magnarelli, a local athlete, businessman, politician and stage actor, is one of 28 members recently enshrined in the North High School Hall of Fame and honored with a plaque on the wall in the main hallway. Fellow inductees

include such well-known Central New Yorkers as musician Larry Arlotta, Salt City Center theater impresario Joe Lotitto, journalist Arlene LaRue, state Sen. John Hughes and actress Hallie Stiles.

Lively discussion and hot coffee attract a crowd to a table near the entrance. "We use every inch of space we have," White says. "Our former equipment storage room is now a fitness room where we have weight equipment, treadmill, elliptical and two bicycles. This center replaced the former McChesney field house, which had been around, I'm going to say, since the 1930s. In the early 1990s, they realized the building was going to need a lot of rehab, so the determination was made by then-Mayor Tom Young to build an actual recreation center. We moved forward with it and in the summer of 1991, the building opened up. It is the first and only true recreation center in the city of Syracuse that has a gymnasium besides the meeting rooms."

As parks staff marks two decades serving the city at the Magnarelli Center, many neighbors have yet to discover the North Side treasure. "I'm amazed that we have individuals who live right here in the neighborhood stop by and just not realize what this is," White says.

The adults who visit the Magnarelli Center regularly say the program does great things for them and often their medical reports provide proof. "When we do blood pressure screenings here, county nurses are just amazed that the heart rates of the people here are so much better than the seniors they deal with elsewhere," White marvels. "They attest to the fact that they choose to stay active and we offer activities that help them do so. They enjoy it. It's a social activity for many of them, but also they realize they get health benefits."