

Lifelong Learning: A Prescription for Successful Aging

by Eileen Beal

Older Americans today are generally healthier, wealthier and better educated than their parents and grandparents and, according to a recently published report,* most are seeking a lifestyle in retirement that provides opportunities for social engagement, physical activity, and mental stimulation. (**A Blueprint for Action*, funded by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging and Partners for Livable Communities, 2007)

And noted the report, they don't want to have to move to an "active adults" or sunbelt community to get the socializing, physical and mental stimulation, and emotional satisfaction they are looking for.

Tap into Community Options

The good news for Northeast Ohioans is that there are plenty of lifelong learning programs and options right here in their communities.

With its plethora of schools, colleges and universities; museums and libraries; senior, community and art centers; and groups, clubs, organizations and craft and/or specialty stores (where students can learn everything from jewelry making to gourmet cooking to flower arranging) – Northeast Ohio is awash in lifelong learning options.

Local school systems (through their vocational education programs or adult education departments) and colleges and universities have taken the lead in providing options for those aiming to keep their intellectual and social skills honed as they age. Offerings at both public and private schools go by many names – classes, courses, seminars, lectures, workshops, study groups, etc. – and they run the gamut from one-session, make-and-take classes (this is where local adult education departments shine!) to semester-long, in-depth examinations of everything from current social issues to Gothic architecture.

Of special note to seniors:

Cuyaboga Community College's Encore Campus and Neighborhood Scholars Programs

(216.987.3075 or www.tri-c.edu/enrichment/seniors/pages/default.aspx)

CWRU's Mini Med School

(216.983.1239 or cme.case.edu/minimedschool/lectures.htm).

60-plus Program

As part of Ohio's commitment to lifelong learning, all public colleges and universities allow Ohioans 60 and older to attend [i.e., audit] classes at no cost.

Attendance is on a space-available basis and must be approved by the instructor. Students auditing courses are responsible for book, equipment and lab fees. For a list of state colleges and universities, and contact information, go to

www.goldenbuckeye.com/families/learning_college.html.

More Opportunities in the Community

Community centers are also terrific providers of programs and activities that appeal to seniors. Of special note:

- Health and wellness activities and programs at Fairhill Center
216.421.1350 or www.fairhillcenter.org
- Adults on the Go Program at Mandel JCC
216.593.0448 or go to
www.clevejcc.org/active-adults.asp
- OASIS Program at Macy's Parmatown Mall
440.886.1157 or
www.oasisnet.org/cleveland/index.htm

Programs offered through cultural organizations – museums, libraries, and art/culture centers, such as Lakewood's Beck Center for the Arts (216.521.2540 or www.beckcenter.org/class/), Chagrin Fall's Valley Art Center (440.247.7507 or www.valleyartcenter.org), Solon's Center for the Arts (440.337.1400 or www.solonarts.org/classes.asp) – are not only mentally stimulating and emotionally fulfilling, they also have been shown to promote physical well-being. According to recent studies, older adults who participate in painting, poetry and choral activities made fewer visits to the doctor, used fewer over-the-counter and prescription medications, experienced fewer accidents and falls, and reported fewer bouts of depression and higher levels of self-esteem.

Hospitals have recently gotten into the lifelong learning act, offering programs, seminars and workshops – on everything from healthy cooking to the joys (and challenges) of becoming a grandparent – that are of interest to retirees and those who are about to “launch.”

MetroHealth Medical Center's programs and activities are housed in the new Senior Health and Wellness Center (216.957.2800 or www.metrohealth.org/body.cfm?id=2049).

For information on other hospitals' programs, call the hospital's community relations department.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning programs don't just meet older adults' needs, they meet their wants, too.

Most are scheduled at times attractive to seniors: between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. or in the early evening.

They are interactive and often self-directed, which means participants go at their own pace.

They are affordable. Programs offered through state colleges and universities are free; those offered by other organizations are very reasonably priced.

And they are fun. They provide the mental stimulation that helps maintain brain function, plus they provide opportunities for socialization, too.

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