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SENIOR CENTER SPOTLIGHT



Michael Hanisco

Southwest Senior Center members (left to right) Loraine Overton, Theresa Sams and Barbara Morris enjoy each other's company before lunch. The members meet regularly for socialization and recreation.

Together is key at Southwest Senior Center: 'Everyone's welcome'

In honor of National Senior Center Month in September, we're launching a new occasional series, Senior Center Spotlight, in which we'll shine a light on each of the PCA-funded senior community centers around Philadelphia. While the centers all provide activities, education and social opportunities for seniors, each one embodies a unique personality and focus – as you'll read.

By Michael Hanisco

Just inside the entrance of Southwest Senior Center, 6916 Elmwood Ave., sits a large blackboard plastered with bright posters and stickers. The first poster features a picture of Earth from outer space and is captioned with a simple, provocative tagline: "I don't see any borders. Do you?" "No one is truly free while others are oppressed," another declares. A third plainly states, "Immigration is the American Way."

Members of the center originally put this collage together to celebrate Women's History Month in 2017, but it was so popular that staff decided to leave it up indefinitely. While new images have been added to the collection over time, the unifying message has remained the same: Everyone is welcome.

It's a message that center director Paulette Cunningham hopes gets through loud and clear to everyone who steps foot inside the center.

"We try to encourage inclusion," she said.

"Every religion, sexual orientation, and culture is welcome here."

The theme of inclusion is reflected in the center's membership and programming. Southwest Senior Center serves a diverse community, with seniors representing the local African-American, Caribbean, South American and Asian populations.

The center is also home to an LGBT support group, which was started by Linda Marucci, center counselor. The group is primarily made up of members who have LGBT adult children and/or grandchildren. They meet weekly to discuss concerns, challenges and ways to change outdated perceptions of LGBT people.

Vernice Bond has two very close friends in the LGBT community. She attends the support group at the center every Wednesday along with a core group of about six others. She says she knows of at least one familial

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Holocaust

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has reported that 93 percent of schools now provide age-appropriate education about the Holocaust and have promised to work with the other seven percent to get them on board as well.

Fink-Whitman has also helped Michigan, Rhode Island and Kentucky to pass similar education bills. Only nine states have such legislation in place, and her mission is to seek more co-sponsors for House Resolution 276, a Congressional resolution encouraging all 50 states to mandate Holocaust education.

Her book is now used in schools around the country and is recommended for use in curricula by both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey departments of education.

“I met with Bensalem High School students who read the book for class and shared with me how they saw themselves in the characters and how the story related to their lives in terms of bullying issues and becoming more tolerant,” Fink-Whitman said. “They said that it inspired them to be ‘upstanders’ instead of ‘bystanders.’ I want to be an example for them, that one person can make a difference.”

To view “The Mandate Video,” purchase or read an excerpt from “94 Maidens,” view Fink-Whitman’s speaking schedule, or download a free teacher’s guide, go to 94Maidens.com.

Author, speaker and writer Barbara Sherftells the stories of businesses and individuals.

Center spotlight

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relationship that was saved as a direct result of the group discussions. The group has been so successful that they have been invited to other senior centers in the city as a model for starting similar groups.

“I just wish people were more understanding,” Bond said. “Life would be so much easier, but I guess life isn’t always easy.” She has “learned a lot about people” since making friends in the LGBT community.

A large number of women at Southwest Senior Center are involved in the Supportive Older Women’s Network (SOWN), which meets once a week. Every meeting begins with each member expressing how she’s feeling that day before branching into a group discussion on a pre-determined topic. What is said in the group stays in the group, a rule that helps to build a feeling of trust.

“A lot of seniors, especially older women, think they’re the only ones going through what they’re going through,” said Barbara Morris, who became active in SOWN almost immediately after her first visit to the center three years ago. “But you’re not alone. We’re all in this together.”

Cunningham wants to challenge outdated perceptions of what a senior center can be. Baby boomers want something different from past generations, she said. Computer classes at the center, which run September

through June, are always well attended. The center also has an active drama club, a busy gym, a choir and a gardening club. The gardeners grow vegetables on-site and host nutritional cooking demonstrations.

Leona Jones said she had always been a plant person but never thought she could grow vegetables in the city until she learned how at Southwest Senior Center. At 70, she is a daily visitor to the center and now grows tomatoes, peppers and squash on her deck at home. She’s quick to show off pictures of her latest harvest on her smartphone.

Lorraine Overton first started coming to Southwest Senior Center to work out after retiring. Though she still works out three times a week, she has gotten much more involved in the center and with other members over the past 19 years. She now enjoys meeting new people through art classes and choir.

“All of [the programming] creates fellowship and togetherness,” Overton said.

Indeed, the theme of togetherness is on full display at Southwest Senior Center, and not just on the blackboard.

“There is always a helping hand and a caring voice here,” said Barbara Morris. “It’s not [just] like a family. It is a family.”

In addition to being funded by PCA, Southwest Senior Center also is managed by the agency.

Michael Hanisco is multimedia communications specialist at Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA).



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