

# LLI grows with senior center members, programs



Elli Morris/Chesterfield Observer

**Maxine Stuber (front) and other seniors** stretch their legs during a "Sit and Be Fit" class held at the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI). LLI and the Senior Center of Chesterfield recently merged.

By Susan Nienow  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI) expansion, which merged members and programs from the now defunct Senior Center of Chesterfield, has "gone well," said LLI Executive Director Debbie Leidheiser in what many would call an understatement.

The senior center, with locations at Monument Avenue and Huguenot Road, closed its doors for financial reasons last summer with little notice. Members were shocked and angry at first, and then created a steering committee of senior center, county, LLI and Virginia Center on Aging representatives to find a way to continue the many opportunities previously available at the Chesterfield location.

The steering committee found the missions of the LLI and the senior center to be similar, so the groups decided to merge.

The county made it possible for former senior center members to become members of the LLI at no charge since they had already paid their \$85 dues to the center. With the increase in membership, the LLI was able to reduce its dues from \$150 to \$100, bringing dues more in line with what the senior center had been charging.

Current membership is 310. Of that number, 140 are former senior center members.

The expansion has brought new classes, new people and new social traditions to the LLI, which is located in the Watkins Annex on Westfield Drive near the Midlothian Post Office. "People seem impressed with the space and the classes. We have a limited number of scholarships and other ways to work out membership fees [if there is a problem]. We have potlucks and socials. [We're] pretty well-rounded," said Leidheiser.

LLI has incorporated Spanish classes as well as other classes and weekly group activities like Canasta and Scrabble, previously offered at the senior center, into its programming. "We try to build programs with other organizations like John Tyler Community College, the YMCA and Parks and Rec," she added.

Annebel Lewis brought the Socrates Café from the senior center to LLI and increased attendance from six or seven to 25 or 30. She facilitates this philosophical discussion group that uses the Socratic method to discuss ques-

tions such as "What is wisdom?" which is the topic for Oct. 27.

"This center is incredible," said Marie Stella, who retired from her job in Washington, D.C. last November and moved here from Spotsylvania County. "I'm just crazy about it." She is having an upcoming surgery in January, so she can attend the next set of classes in February.

But, it's not just the classes, Stella added. "The women in the classes - they have so much to offer. [They're] bright, creative, articulate." When asked about the classes she is taking, she tapped her Spanish textbook and said, "Conversational Spanish, writing, watercolors, mythology, opera."

The institute is offering 60 classes this fall and is currently putting together its spring schedule, said Leidheiser.

The two-and-a-half-year-old organization is always looking for teachers. All faculty are volunteers.

John Lemza has taught at the institute since it opened its doors, and his history classes are very popular. Over 50 are attending his "Themes in American History: From Discovery to the Reconstruction" class.

Lemza is a graduate of the United States Academy at West Point and recently retired after a career with the U.S. Army. He also teaches at John Tyler Community College.

"I like teaching here because of the students. They are receptive, but challenge what they hear. They value education, participate in it and pursue it," said Lemza.

Marlene Bailey is a former senior center member who comes to the institute every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. She enjoys any classes on history and plays cards with the Canasta and Hand and Foot groups. "The book discussions are great. I read everything from mysteries to Tim Russert's new book." Bailey hopes her daughter will give her a 2007 membership for Christmas.

LLI is administered and operated by volunteer members and its sponsors: Brandermill Woods Foundation, Virginia Center on Aging at Virginia Commonwealth University, Chesterfield Public Schools and Chesterfield County. It is a member of the Elderhostel Institute Network.

For further information, call LLI at 378-2527, visit the Web site at [www.llichesterfield.org](http://www.llichesterfield.org) or e-mail [info@llichesterfield.org](mailto:info@llichesterfield.org).

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