

A HISTORY OF THE ARLINGTON COUNTY SENIOR ADULT PROGRAM, 1954-1984

By

Jeanne Rose

It all began on October 4, 1954, at the old "Henderson House", the site of which is now Lubber Run's playground. Shortly before that, Libby Deever (later Libby Deever Neeld), a longtime member of the County's Recreation Department, had put an ad in area newspapers inviting any interested persons over sixty to a meeting to form a "Senior Citizen" group.¹ Forty-two persons showed up, and Club #1 took shape. Its first President was Sarah Richardson, and its motto was "Fun, Friendship, and Fraternity."

Mrs. Neeld's adventurous concept rapidly bore fruit. The country's first senior center had opened in New York as recently as 1948, and Arlington's was the very first officially organized senior club for Virginia. It must be realized that senior citizens had hardly as yet been recognized as a group wanting and welcoming attention; they were supposed to sit on the porch and rock, or, like Whistler's mother, just sit. Mrs. Neeld was a pioneer in seeking to fill a real need.

But however smoothly Club #1 (soon christened Silver Age Club #1) got its start, it soon ran into (literally) rough weather. Two weeks after that first meeting, Hurricane Hazel came slashing through Arlington, and caused an electrical short at the Henderson House which a day later brought about a fire that destroyed the building.² Club #1 and the Recreation Department were homeless. The seniors moved first to the old Dolley Madison School on Shirley Highway, then to the Clarendon Presbyterian Church, but they kept meeting. (Two people who attended the postponed second meeting were the late Mr. and Mrs. Garland Kendrick, for a long time prominent in senior citizens affairs in Arlington County.) One hundred members celebrated the first anniversary in October 1955, and trips for seniors began to be arranged, as carefully-preserved scrapbooks from the early days attest. A monthly Silver Age Newsletter was started in 1957³, and in that same year members of Club #1 attended the first National Senior Citizens Convention in New Orleans, another landmark. Best of all, says Kristine Pederson, ninety-three and a charter member of the Club, "We had fun."

One early and pleasant relationship began in 1956 when the Recreation Department (now in its new building at 300 North Park Drive) provided room for the Over-60 Employment Service, headed by Mrs. Dana Robinson and co-sponsored by the Soroptimists, Silver Age Club #1, and the Department.⁴ This service was of immense help to seniors needing and/or desiring jobs. The Soroptimists helped in another way, as old-timers remember, by furnishing refreshments for Club #1 meetings.

As interest and membership continued to grow, new clubs were formed. Club #2, which branched off from #1,⁵ was at first called the Rock Spring Rockets, because it first met at the Rock Spring Neighborhood House, with eight to ten charter member. (Like several of the other clubs, it later changed its meeting

place.) It was started on December 11, 1959, and its first president was Elizabeth Baird. Club #3 began April 25, 1961, with forty-five members, and now meets at the Arlington Presbyterian Church. Its first president was Emma Courtenay. Other clubs of the early 1960s were the Happy Hearts Club #4, founded in April 1963; and the Jolly Sixties, #5, which began on September 10, 1964. These clubs soon were scheduling and enjoying trips, as all of the clubs continue to do today.

Unfortunately it is not possible to detail fully the activities of the first decade, as the official file of the "Newsletter" only starts with February 1965.⁶ But a former Senior Adult Specialist Supervisor remembers early programs, such as Gourmet Budget Cooking, Painting, "Stretch" Exercise, and Bowling (begun in 1960).⁷

Three more clubs were formed in the late 1960s - - Saga VI on October 21, 1968, Club #7 (Westover) on October 13, 1969, and the Crystal Club #8, on November 4, 1969, with five members, at Calvary United Methodist Church, Saga VI's first president was Beatrice Daniel. We should mention here the start of a group to do service projects, Kelly's Helpers, founded by the late, much loved club supervisor Kelly McPherson. It still "gathers twice a month to chat, sew lap robes and do other projects for the needy and for nursing homes."⁸ The first president of Club #7 was Kathryn Sherwood.

A constitution, to be the guideline for all Silver Age Clubs, was adopted in late 1968.

In October 1969 the Lubber Run Walking Club began, as more and more folks joined the five couples who had been meeting and walking in the area. The first president was Henry H. Miller. "The purpose of the Club is leisure oriented to provide fellowship and recreation for any County resident age fifty-five or over; the average age of the current club members is seventy."⁹ 1969 also saw the start of film programs for senior adults at the Arlington County Central Library. For a while in the late 1960s and early 1970s there was also a World of Books program that met monthly at the Library.

The 1962-63 annual report of the Department of Recreation and Parks lists these activities for the Silver Age Clubs: bowling, shuffleboard, trips, bridge, dinners, and fashion shows. It further notes that members of the clubs took part in a movie filmed at Dulles Airport.

With the 1970s came many new developments: notably, the names of the groups were changed from Silver Age Clubs to Senior Adult Clubs, and the county service became the Senior Adult Program rather than Senior Citizen Program. The January 1970 Newsletter proudly noted that the activities included: Senior Adult Clubs, two "Swingin Sixties" (Home Demonstration) Clubs, the Walking Club, Sing-a-long, Afternoon of Films (at the library), an Instrumental Group, and the "Night Owls", who dined out and then attended plays and films at night. (This group flourished all through the 1970s.) More clubs made their appearance. Club #9, the Ballston Busy Bees, had its first meeting on February 12, 1970, and Club #10, the Cherrydalers, also dates from the early 1970s. At its first meeting, with thirty women present, Louise Ross was elected president. Club #10, as well as #11, the Leisure Lees, were the first clubs to meet in Senior Adult Centers, of which more later. The Leisure Lees Club #11 had their first meeting November 2,

1971, with Garland Caudell as President, They adopted the name "Leisure Lees" at the June 6, 1972 meeting. In 1971 also along came Club #12, "The Jolly Hearts", which continues to meet at Veterans Memorial YMCA. (It had been organized as an independent club on February 15, 1962.)

Club #13, Arlington View, is unique in several ways. It was actually organized in October 1956 as a Senior Citizens Club I, but is first listed in the 1962-63 annual report of the Department of Recreation and Parks, and became a full-time participant in the Senior Adult program, with a Club number, in 1970. Another distinction is that over its twenty-seven year history it has had only two presidents, Martha Gilliam and Clarence Shepard. It has an ongoing membership of over 200.

The Neighbors' Corner also flourished for some years as Senior Citizens Club II, before it acquired its official designation as Club #14. It meets at the Langston/Brown Center.

One important first of 1970 was the first Senior Adult Camp, September 14-16, 1970. Summer Camp has continued as a yearly event which provides fun, fresh air, and companionship for seniors. It was held at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1970, later at Smith Mountain View 4-H Camp in Virginia, and now takes place at Claggett Center in nearby Buckeystown, Maryland. It was the first such camp for Virginia seniors, and early prognoses of failure by outsiders have been proven resoundingly wrong!

A major change in the program came with the opening of Senior Adult Centers. This began with the inauguration of the Hannon Hall Center, in the Cherrydale area, on April 20, 1971. (In June 1980 this center moved to the basement of St. Andrews Episcopal Church at Lorcom Lane and Military Road.) The Lee Center, located in the old Lee School at the corner of Lee Highway and North Lexington Street, opened next, on October 19, 1971. There was also a Glebe Center, on Old Glebe Road near the Walker Chapel (this center was later closed). These first centers provided what the later ones continued - - a place where all seniors, not just the club members, could meet, socialize, and engage in pleasant activities. They made it possible, too, for the Senior Adult Program to go beyond its early aim of "recreation only" and provide classes in a great variety of subjects, with outside experts as teachers.

In 1972 Libby Neeld resigned, to work with her husband in their peach orchard in Maryland. She was succeeded by Mary Helen McFadden, who had been working in various capacities for the Department of Recreation since 1963. Mrs. McFadden has kindly shared some of her memories with the writer of this history.

Under her administration, programs continued to expand. The Glebe Travel Club, offering a great variety of trips, began in 1972; it eventually became "Senior Adult Trips" for all interested seniors. Peggy Fisher's painting classes started in February 1973; everyone has seen exhibits of her students' fine work. The Song-fellows also trace their start to 1973. Under Mrs. McFadden, too, began the Walking Sticks - - exercise for hardy seniors who use canes.

The next center, Thomas Jefferson, opened its doors in November 1972, and almost immediately (January 29, 1973) became the home of T. J. Club #15. Elsie Parker was its first president. It now has 150 members and a waiting list. Three other centers also opened in 1973: Drew, Walter Reed, and Wilson, on

April 7 in the case of the latter. (The Walter Reed Center had been in existence since 1964, but it was in 1973 that the Senior Adult Program started.)

Another worthwhile activity became available in 1973, when the Washington-Lee Pool opened, and offered free swims to senior citizens at certain hours. The Senior Adult Service now also uses the pool for water exercise classes.

The Merrymakers Rhythm Band began in 1972 and has developed into a popular entertainment group.⁹ Two more clubs started in that year - - #16, the Sweet Sixteen, which started at Clarendon United Methodist Church on February 26, 1974, with the motto "Active in entertainment and fellowship", and the Goldenagers, #17, formed February 22, 1974, who meet at Greenbrier Baptist Church.

1975 marked the addition of two more active senior adult centers. Gunston Community Center, formerly a junior high school, opened in June 1975. It is unique among the centers in offering hot noon meals five days a week. When Culpepper Garden, a retirement home, opened to residents in September of that year, its whole basement area was available for senior adult activities. The Culpepper Garden Center program is now the Senior Adult Program's major function. The last center to open was the Aurora Hills Center, in May 1978. It occupies space in a multi-purpose complex that includes a branch library, the Visitors' Center, and a fire station!

Club #18, Happy Hands, was organized in 1976 in Fairfax County, but moved to Arlington in 1977, because more of its members lived here. It is unique, in that it was designed for the hearing-impaired and deaf. Its first president was Ralph Miller, and it has grown - - it started with only eight members, and now has thirty-seven.

Clubs #19 and #20, Live and Learn, and XYZ, joined the program in 1976 or 1977, but dropped out in early 1981. They still meet, but outside the county structure.

In May 1978 Mary Helen McFadden resigned as Supervisor. She now lives in Lake of the Woods, between Culpeper and Fredericksburg, and is active in community affairs. She was succeeded in September 1978 by Bill Gress, who stayed just a year.

In 1979 his regime brought several "firsts." Participation in the Golden Olympics began in April of that year, the Golf Club started at T. J., and the Humanities Program was inaugurated at Wilson School. A Little Theatre Group was started at Gunston, but this apparently no longer exists. It was during this period, too, that the last two clubs, #21 and #22, were organized on April 19, 1975 and in March 1979 respectively. The first president of "Club 21" was Delma Rice, and the first president of the Fair Golds was Turley Divine.

1978 brought about a reorganization of the Senior Adult Program. Now the clubs that meet at the centers are under the jurisdiction of the centers.

Bill Gress resigned at the end of 1979, and is now volunteering at the Day Center, where he is a member of the Board of Directors. He remains a strong advocate of Senior programs in general.

Barbara Cardellichio is the current Arlington Specialist Supervisor. Under her

guidance, as we come up to date, are a great variety of events; a recent brochure lists fifty-six activities in the clubs and centers combined.

To summarize: there are now twenty-two clubs (actually twenty). Nine meet at churches, nine at centers, one at an American Legion post and one at a YMCA. Most of them get together twice a month, with one business and one social meeting, and offer bridge, trips, travel slides, luncheons, bingo, and other games and entertainments. There are nine centers. Of these, almost all have bridge groups and bridge lessons, several have walking clubs, and Gunston and Lee Centers host Wellness Clubs. As a further sampling: Aurora Hills has an ongoing series "Let's Go to the Opera", and a yoga class. Cherrydale, in addition to providing a meeting place for the Men's Club and the Squires and Dames, has frequent museum jaunts to D. C. Gunston has a sewing and needlework circle, a sign language class, and a series of talks on Crime Prevention. At the Lee Center book reviews are given; there is also an exercise class, and a ballroom dancing group. T. J. also has an exercise class, and houses the Photo Club. Walter Reed presents square dancing and ballroom dancing, also an art class. The Humanities Group and the Wilson Bookworms are features at Wilson School Center, while Drew hosts a ceramics class.

The real proliferation of activities has been at Culpepper, where, in addition to many courses, they offer the Great Decisions lectures; exercise and dancing classes; a Writer's Workshop; a Poetry Reading Group; pool; and watercolor painting. Space prevents a complete listing of all the happenings at all the centers, but the monthly Newsletter gives them.

In addition, on the more serious side, the Senior Adult Program offers legal and income tax service, and provides free blood-pressure check-ups.

Then there are the nine special clubs:

The Arlington Senior Golf Club, organized in April 1982, with a present membership of about 110.

Cherrydale Men's Club, organized May 17, 1971 with six charter members.

Today there are twenty-nine members, including one of the original six.

They play chess, pinochle, and shuffleboard.

Dropshot Tennis Club, organized in August 1983.

Leonard Bacon Photo Club.

Lobsters Tennis Club, founded 1978.

Lubber Run Walking Club, founded 1969.

Monday Bowling Club.

Squires and Dames, founded 1972, with Herb Twynham as its first president. They meet three times a month for a program of refreshments, slideshows, and shuffleboard.

Swinging Sixties Craft Club, organized in 1968 as a Home Demonstration Club. Its first president was Grace Steiner.

One important organization has not hitherto been mentioned. This is the Senior Adult Council, which is composed of two delegates from each club. It meets once a month to discuss matters of mutual concern, and is now busy with the great year of 1984, the "pearl" anniversary. The Council was founded in December 1971, but adopted its by-laws in 1978 at the time of the reorganization.

So much for the past, present, and near-future. What of the long-range future?

The Arlington County Government publication *The Citizen*, October 1983 issue, states that Arlington has 27,000 citizens sixty or over - - 17% of the population. Senior Adult programs reach 6,000 of these, a goodly portion. What should be the next goals? Only time will tell, but at least we can be sure that they will equal the illustrious past.

In any case, the Senior Adult Program looks back on thirty productive years, and forward to many times thirty more!

P. S. The author welcomes corrections or additions to this history.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Information from Fay Rosado
- ² Silver Age Club *Newsletter*, October, 1968.
Information from Fay Rosado
- ³ Arlington County, Virginia. Department of Recreation and Parks. *Annual report*, 1956-57.
- ⁴ *Ibid. Annual report*, 1959-60.
- ⁵ Information from Mildred Williams.
- ⁶ If anyone has a newsletter file, 1956 through January 1965, please communicate with Barbara Cardellichio, 558-2672.
- ⁷ Conversation with Mary Helen McFadden, 10/14/83.
- ⁸ *Senior Adult Newsletter*, 9/83, p. 5.
- ⁹ *Lubber Run Walking Club History*.

SOURCES

Conversations with:

Barbara Cardellichio
Mary Helen McFadden
Kristine Pederson
Fay Rosado
Mildred Williams

Arlington County, Va. *The Citizen*. October, 1983.

Arlington County, Va. Department of Recreation and Parks. *Annual reports*, 1956-57, 59-60, 62-63.
Club #1. Scrapbooks.

Club histories

Senior Adult Centers histories.

Senior Adult Program. *Newsletters*, 2/65 to date.