

Senior Spotlight

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Thanks to a free workshop called Living Healthy, local seniors with chronic conditions are ...

Getting better together

A while back, Barbara Ungerman took a writing class and had to put together a piece about things she didn't realize she loved to do until she couldn't do them anymore.

Breathing, she wrote. Making a fist. Bending her fingers. Eating lettuce (she worried she would choke and it would get stuck in her throat).

Life had drastically changed for Ungerman after she'd broken her leg and hit her head on a brick wall as she was falling. She struggled to breathe and swallow. She took anti-depressants and medicine for acid reflux. She found little relief.

On one of her regular visits to the Jewish Community Center in Albany, Ungerman saw a flyer about some of the programs offered the University at Albany's Center for Excellence in Aging & Community

By Jacqueline M. Domin

Wellness. She signed up for a six-week Healthy Living workshop aimed at adults with chronic conditions and health-related limitations. She met other people who were struggling, which was reassuring, but more importantly, they all learned ways to live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

"I was a wreck," Ungerman said. "And now I'm not."

Ungerman highly recommends the Living Healthy workshop, which is free and runs for six weeks. Workshops are continually held throughout the Capital District, and they're led by peers – people who can relate because they're suffering from their own chronic conditions.

Carol Wood has to deal with pain and low energy stemming from a condition similar to fibromyalgia. When she heard that Healthy Living

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Recent participants in a Living Healthy workshop, held regularly throughout the Capital District.

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was looking for peer leaders, she thought she'd be a good candidate. She has a background in nursing and massage therapy, and she was looking for a volunteer opportunity in retirement.

So Wood went through training, as all peer leaders do, and then she jumped right into the business of helping people learn how to self-manage their health.

The program is good at taking people beyond general recommendations like "improve your diet" to real action like reading food labels and adjusting portion sizes, Wood said. A key part of the program is an "action plan" in which each participant puts a new behavior into practice. The following week, each reports back about how successful he or she was at adhering to the action plan. If participants had trouble sticking to the plan, they can ask the rest of the group to brainstorm what went wrong and how they can change it.

"It's kind of like sharing with a self-help group," Wood said.

Ungerman said she and the others in her group so enjoyed the camaraderie that they continue to get together once a month. And they still make up action plans and report on their progress.

Ungerman said some people in her group had concrete aims like to drink more water or walk more. Her plans were more basic: "The healthy things I'm doing, I will do more and keep track of them," she said.

That was partly because Ungerman was limited in the beginning as to what she could do. She couldn't make a fist. She couldn't hold a weight. She credits both a balance class and Healthy Living with helping her regain those abilities.

"Now I can do everything," she said.

Ungerman said she enrolled for the classes after deciding "it was a time to get well," a sentiment peer leader Richard Reynolds hopes more people will embrace.

"Sometimes people want to sit inside and be a hermit," he said. "But you can't let your chronic condition control your life."

Reynolds know of what he speaks. Diagnosed with prostate cancer, Reynolds had surgery to remove his prostate. But the doctor removed more than necessary, leaving him unable to control

his bladder, he said. Surgery will probably eventually correct it, but he grapples with anger and frustration.

"It's good to have someone in the same boat teach the class," he said.

A professional clown, Reynolds

has also worked as a liaison in hospitals. He's always been attracted to helping fields, he said. So when he learned about Healthy Living, he signed up.

"It's enriching for me as a leader," he said. "And it's a meaningful, eye-opening experience for the participants."

Reynolds shared the story of a woman who was hunched over and had to use a walker. At her husband's insistence, she wore a bicycle helmet because she frequently fell.

Healthy Living helped her gain balance and confidence. At the end of the course, she saw a picture of herself and didn't even recognize herself.

"She was completely transformed," Reynolds said.

Caretakers are welcome at the Healthy Living classes, which focus on topics such as:

- Better communication with doctors
- Making informed treatment decisions
- Planning for future health care
- Increased physical activity and
- Better coping strategies and symptom management.

Registration is required. Call 442-5529 to find a class near you.

"It's enriching for me as a leader. And it's a meaningful, eye-opening experience for the participants."

Peer leader
Richard Reynolds



Visitors to miSci in Schenectady try out the interactive activities that are part of a new exhibit called "Seeing." Developed in partnership with the Exploratorium in San Francisco, "Seeing" represents a major shift for miSci, formerly the Schenectady Museum.

Submitted photo

New exhibit 'Seeing' plenty of senior visitors

miSci's making transition to regional science center

By Jacqueline M. Domin

Chris Hunter has noticed a lot of grandparents checking out the new exhibit at miSci, formerly the Schenectady Museum.

"They'll say, 'I have to bring my grandkids back to see this,'" said Chris Hunter, miSci's director of archives and collections

The exhibit is part of miSci's mission to transform itself into a regional science center. A key part of the mission is to increase the number of interactive exhibits.

MiSci staffers talked to industry experts about how to enhance their hands-on offerings, and they heard the same thing over and over: Hook up with the folks at San Francisco's Exploratorium, home to more than 450 participatory exhibits.

So miSci and the Exploratorium struck a five-year deal calling for miSci to display exhibits from the Exploratorium. The first one, "Seeing," opened Saturday, Oct. 6, in Schenectady and is already getting high marks from visitors, said Hunter.

"We'd gotten a lot of requests for hands-on activities," he said. "This

is kind of a level of interactivity that the area hasn't seen before."

Indeed, on a recent afternoon, visitors were gamely shooting basketballs, trying on goggles and carefully studying images as they enjoyed "Seeing," which focuses on visual perception. The basketballs were part of an exhibit called "Hoop Nightmares" in which visitors shoot two basketballs at a hoop. They then don a pair of goggles outfitted with prisms that make the basket appear off center. They shoot while wearing the glasses, often missing.

But then, "you sort of learn to correct," Hunter said. That happens after about 15 shots.

Take the goggles off, and you'll probably still shoot to the side.

"Your eyes and brain haven't quite corrected yet," Hunter said.

Hunter said one of the benefits of "Seeing" is that it has signs with each exhibit explaining what is happening. They're in Spanish and English, letting visitors know the science behind Hoop Nightmares and the other exhibits.

MiSci is at 15 Nott Terrace Heights in Schenectady. Admission is \$9.50, \$8 for seniors 65 and older and \$6.50 for children 3 to 12. For more information, visit www.miSci.org.