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ASHEVILLE'S HOMEPAGE

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Eat well, move more, enjoy life: Project EMMA keeps Asheville-area seniors active

By Sandra V. Rodriguez

Julian Palien believes he owes EMMA some credit for his independence.

And he needs it as, at age 87, he still has a longer to-do list than most men half his age: do laundry, wash dishes, cook dinner, mow the grass on his one-third acre property and, this summer, splash paint on the outside of his house.

Palien, who admits to not being a spring chicken, has been attending Project EMMA exercise classes at Weaverville's First Baptist Church two days a week for about a year and half.

“I don't think without this exercise I'd be as physical. Otherwise, there would be a lot of things I probably couldn't do,” he said. “You take that (independence) from an individual and you're taking part of a life away.”

Stories like Palien's are numerous among visitors to Project EMMA's (Eat Better, Move More, Age Well) sites, which are scattered throughout Buncombe County. It is coordinated by The Council on Aging of Buncombe County, a nonprofit that offers senior services like home visit assessments, care management, case assistance, subsidized in-home aide services, caregiver respite and Medicare counseling

“I think in the community, you hear a lot about children and obesity, and certainly children's needs,” said Wendy Marsh, executive director of the Council on Aging. “And all those things are really, really important, but our goal here is that older adults are not left out of that equation.”

The older population tends to suffer from health-related issues like arthritis, high blood pressure, diabetes, difficulty with mobility and depression — and that's from adults who were considered active, Marsh said. And Project EMMA has helped build up elder residents' health, fitness and emotional well-being.

Improving diet

Through EMMA, the Council, which operates five senior dining sites for adults age 60 and older, provides a restaurant-quality meal daily that includes fresh, local vegetables and fruits at its senior dining sites. The meals are free although donations are accepted.

It also operates seven senior exercise centers in the county, which offer low-impact exercises that tone muscles and encourage balance.

Among Monica Weinstein's seniors at the Weaverville exercise site at First Baptist, she has seen people with diabetes whose sugar levels have gone down.

She also recalls one man who had a rotator cuff surgery and has increased the ease of movement so much, she said, “the doctor said he didn't know what the senior was doing, but keep it up.”

“It's the continuity that keeps the seniors going,” she said. “And, boy, I'll tell you, they'll push themselves to get here because they don't want to give up.”

Ann Calloway, a 73-year-old resident of Weaverville, spends every morning at the senior site in Weaverville socializing with friends and joining in on the group activities. She said elderly adults all suffer depression at some point and that being active and socializing helped her move on when she was suffering from it after when her husband died in 2001.

“Physically, I'm pretty fit even though I'm a pump-wearing diabetic,” she said, adding the exercise and socializing keeps the stress level down.

“It keeps me feeling good, it keeps me active. It's good for me to have the interchange with other people. Maybe lighten their load for a little while, smile, be a friend, listen.”

Phil Gale, manager of the senior dining program, said there's a growing realization among older adults that a stronger, more flexible body and mind will keep them from falling and having a “serious health event,” and that's what's driving the program's growth.

Or maybe not. “The thing is, it becomes a habit,” Palien said. “Once you start, it becomes part of your life like anything you do seriously. It's like a drink of water — you feel like if you don't have it, you miss it.”

Additional Facts

About EMMA

To learn about Project EMMA, visit www.coabc.org/health-wellness/emma/project-emma.
The Council on Aging of Buncombe County operates a rooftop garden at Battery Park Apartments. It is seeking volunteers with gardening or nutritional background, or anyone interested in working with elder residents. Call Cyndy Wallhauser at 252-7995.

• Terrace Apartments, 200 Tunnel Road, Asheville. For days and times, call 255-8345.

• Avery's Creek Community Center, 889 E. Glenn Bridge Road, Arden. Call 674-8184.

• Battery Park Apartments, 1 Battle Square, Asheville. Call 252-7995.

• Lakeview Community Center, Rhododendron Drive, Black Mountain. Call 669-2035.

• Senior Opportunity Center, Grove Street, Asheville. Call 350-2062.

• Shiloh Community Center, 121 Shiloh Road, Asheville. Call 274-7739. First Baptist Church, 63 N. Main St., Weaverville. Call 775-9297.
Most senior dining sites are open 9 a.m.-1 p.m. five days a week. Lunch is served at noon.
Activities include speakers, exercise, craft projects, health checks, yoga, music, inspirational programs, shopping, board games and Bingo.
Dining sites are at Weaverville First Baptist Church, Shiloh Community Center and Senior Opportunity Center. See addresses, above.