

Aging Gracefully

Whitney WithOut Walls Keeps Seniors Active

Weight training. Flexibility. Balance. It's not your typical senior center experience. But three times a week, women as old as 90 gather to touch their toes or balance on one leg in an effort to stay active, healthy and independent as a part of the Whitney WithOut Walls program.

"Seniors often go for a walk, but this program forces them to broaden their activity by balancing on one leg or balancing on one leg while touching their head," said Valerie Rogosheske, program coordinator and exercise instructor.

"We are so grateful for the Women's Fund. We thought we were going to have to stop the program."

"Strength training is really new for many of them but it's been proven as a key to preventing falls and staying independent."

When a lack of funding put the program in jeopardy and led leaders to scale back operations last summer, the women continued to meet at Salem Lutheran Church in St. Cloud. They enjoyed the exercises, the activity and the socialization. But they still needed an instructor to continue to teach them the right exercises and techniques and keep them safe.

A recent \$8,000 grant from the Women's Fund at the Central Minnesota Community Founda-

tion revived the outreach program this fall to provide a combination of exercise, entertainment and social interaction to St. Cloud-area seniors. "We are so grateful for the Women's Fund," Rogosheske said. "We thought we were going to have to stop the program."

The idea for the Whitney WithOut Walls program sprang from a need to expand the Whitney Senior Center's capacity and bring its programming to an underserved population who often faced mobility challenges. Whitney Senior Center had been operating at 95 percent capacity, said Steve Hennes, executive director of Whitney Senior Center.

"As we age, we often withdraw from our normal activities, especially when we have problems with transportation or mobility," Hennes said. "When we hesitate to go to activities, we have a tendency to minimize our socialization opportunities. The benefit of the WWOW program is that we bring the activities to the seniors. In many cases, participants just need to open their apartment door and walk down the hall."

Whitney Senior Center, funded by the City of St. Cloud, developed a partnership in 2006 with Benet Place, a low-income independent living facility in St. Cloud. Benet Place provides the space and covers all the traditional building expenses while local organizations provided the financial support for the program.

Rising demand for the program led it to expand the next year to Salem Lutheran Church to serve seniors living nearby. "People are finding that they are able to get out more, do more things and they are happier because of the social interaction," Hennes said.



The Women's Fund at the Central Minnesota Community Foundation recently awarded \$8,000 to the Whitney WithOut Walls program to provide exercise, entertainment and educational opportunities for area seniors.

Since starting in 2006, Whitney WithOut Walls has served more than 25,000 seniors. Last year, the program reached more than 8,800 seniors at the two sites. A "Music to Your Ears" concert alone draws about 100 people, Rogosheske said.

"The senior population is growing very rapidly," Hennes said. "It's the fastest growing population in the U.S. and it's going to be that way for years. There's going to be a need for this program for some time."

The program's innovation has earned it a series of awards, including The League of Minnesota Cities, Minnesota Health and Housing Alliance and the United Way of Central Minnesota.

