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Seniors Staying Busy

By [Brian Andrew](#)

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When Richard B. Chabot needs an icebreaker for an audience of senior citizens, he likes to list off synonyms of retirement found in Roget's Thesaurus. By the time he makes it through disappearance, old age and withdrawal, the audience is usually roaring with laughter.

Seniors across the nation are redefining what it means to retire and can now laugh at what was once the face of old age. Although bingo, golf and traveling remain popular, seniors are also finding new ways to enjoy their retirements that reflect what some like to call their newfound youth. Seniors today are more active, in large part due to longer life spans, increased health and postponed retirement. In Loudoun County, the senior lifestyle is changing as dramatically as it is nationally. Instead of hitting the links or booking cruises, many local seniors are regularly attending senior centers, continuing their education, joining senior social groups, competing in local Senior Olympics and volunteering thousands of hours in their community.

William McAuley, professor of sociology at George Mason University, says that there is a change in the ways people think about aging and old age.

"I think that we'll see that being old will be thought of at an older age than what it used to be," said McAuley. "Individuals who retire today are very healthy and have a number of interests they want to continue."

These interests are leading some area seniors to pack their backpacks and head back to school. One hundred twenty-five Loudoun residents enrolled in spring classes at the newly opened Loudoun branch of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at George Mason University. This continuing education program, originally based in Fairfax County, offers in-depth intimate courses taught by volunteer George Mason faculty and knowledgeable residents in subjects including international relations, history, writing, singing and English.

Chabot, OLLI's executive director, believes that not every senior wants to travel or play golf. "It's a human need to want continuing education," Chabot said. "OLLI is for people who want to learn and grow with other like-minded people."

WHILE NOT ALL RETIREES are attracted to continuing education programs, most seniors do seek organizations where they can meet people their own age. The county's four senior centers provide a wide range of recreational, educational, and cultural opportunities for active independent seniors. Donna Renner, director of the Senior Center at Cascades, says that there is always someone waiting at the facility's door when she opens at 9 a.m.

An hour and a half later, Roseanne Vecchio of Countryside is already hard at work swiping cards and greeting the center's members by name. Vecchio has been volunteering at the Senior Center at Cascades as its full-time receptionist since its grand opening eight years ago. Although she dislikes attention, she enjoys people and wants them to feel welcome. As dozens of members crowd the common room to catch up with a friend or wait for their class, Vecchio describes the center as, "not a place where people sit and do nothing." People just love coming here, she says. Bill Kalteissen of Sterling can attest to that. He's been attending the facility for seven years since moving to the area from New Jersey to be closer to his daughter. His wife likes to line dance and loved the center's trip to Savannah, Ga., but Kalteissen better appreciates the card games and shooting pool.

"I come here to be with my friends," said Kalteissen, lining up for a tough shot into the corner pocket. "As you can see, we're not that good at pool."

"Speak for yourself," chuckled his opponent from across the table.

THE LOCAL SENIOR centers also connect retirees to a wide-range of senior programs in the area. Bill Keller, 92, of Lovettsville, first learned about the Annual Northern Virginia Senior Olympics at the Leesburg Senior Center two years ago, shortly after moving to the area from Long Island. The Senior Olympics are open for men and women over 50 from the Northern Virginia area and



Photo contributed by Cheryl Wheeler
Bill Keller and Jan Treadwell sport the medals they won for miniature golf at the Annual Northern Virginia Senior Olympics.

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include traditional events such as track and field, swimming and tennis and also special events such as board games, line dancing and horseshoes.

Keller will compete for his second year this September in pool, table tennis, miniature golf and bowling. He wishes that they would implement an age bracket in pool, however, because it's pretty tough competing with 65-year-old guys. But he whips them sometimes, he says.

Keller believes that keeping active is the key to staying healthy. Besides training for the Olympics, he also teaches chess, plays in a local jazz ensemble and leads Bible lessons. "It's a leisure life [in Loudoun] but you're kept busy every minute," said Keller. "There's always something to do."

And when there isn't, seniors are increasingly taking matters into their own hands. Four years ago, Pamela Halston, 57, of Leesburg, and two friends met for coffee and agreed that there weren't enough programs in the area for active seniors. They decided to begin the Ashburn Classics Senior Social Club as a group for active individuals over 50 to establish friendships and a community. After four years, the club has 90 members and includes a book club, bridge club and finance club.

Although her club has experienced success, Halston still believes that there could be more options for active seniors in the county. Her greatest concern is that there will not be enough health facilities and senior housing to accommodate new seniors to the area and the aging of the baby boomer generation. However, as the county's senior population increases, she believes that the percentage of seniors that are active will continue to grow and the environment for seniors will steadily improve.

Halston doesn't see seniors rushing back to their shuffleboards and summer cruises any time soon. "When people reach retirement age, they are realizing that they have a lot more living to do," she said.

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