Sixty Years Young: from Golden Age Club to Adult & Senior Center of Saratoga, 1955-2015

The Early Years

“We are entering an Age of Age, an era which does not slight the youthful attributes of vigor and aggressiveness and endurance and speed, but which is marked by ‘co-existence’ of youth and age in industry, families, and community; by continued service by the aged to churches, clubs, production and his fellowman.”

“Oldsters are rebelling against idleness, learning new tricks, and changing our economies.”

(Thomas C. Desmond, Age of the Aged, The Rotarian, 1955)

In the 1950s, concern in the United States about the health and well-being of seniors led to government studies, the rise of the study of ageing (gerontology) and demands by active seniors for economic and social opportunity.

State Senator Thomas C. Desmond’s legislative committee on the problems of the aging pioneered discussions and advocated for change in New York State. Reports such as “Young at Any Age (1950), “Age is No Barrier (1952),“ Birthdays Don’t Count (1955)” helped usher in what he called the “Age of the Aged (1955) across the nation.

In many communities, seniors took the initiative in ensuring their own well-being, founding of “Golden Age Clubs.” In Saratoga, educators, public officials, seniors and the Saratoga County Health Association banded together to form a Saratoga Golden Age club in 1955. Their goal: to serve the county’s “7,700-odd oldsters” over the age of 50. Led by Minnie Borneman and Edna Hays, the Club started with 48 charter members.

After first meeting in the Saratoga Springs Public Library, American Legion Home, & Presbyterian Church, the Club sought a permanent home. Incorporated as the Senior Center of Saratoga Springs in 1957, the group, led by Claude Van Wie, purchased 162 Circular Street in 1958. It opened in 1959 and remained the Center’s home until 1979. Its articles of incorporation lay down an enduring mission: “to promote the best interests of the seniors” of Saratoga Springs and Saratoga County for which it would procure a building as meeting place.
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Organization

How is it organized? It is an incorporated body with a board of directors and executive
director whose first priority is setting up programs for the Center. It is sponsored by: Civic
minded individuals and groups including: The Saratoga County Health Association, the
Saratoga County Heart Chapter, Kiwanis, Area Churches, Skidmore College, Saratoga
Springs Public Schools, Local Industry, Saratoga Springs Library
(Senior Center, 1960s brochure)

From the early years, the Center had a board of directors for strategic planning
and fundraising (12-21 members) and an executive director who manages the
Center’s activities and seniors’ engagement. Influential leaders include organizer
Minnie Borneman, Edna Hogan, president of the Golden Age Club, Margaret
Hays, the Center’s first secretary and later president of the Board of Directors.

Claude van Wie, Saratoga Springs’ superintendent of schools and the board’s
first president, organ-ized the purchase of the Circular Street property, and
Robert Gass (1976-1988), supervised the move to a new home (which now bears
his name).

Marjorie Vokes was the Center’s first paid executive director, a job she held until
1970. Under her leadership, membership tripled from ca. 100 to over 300 seniors;
three dozen or so used the Center every day. Over the years, a half-dozen women,
notably Sylvia Newcomb (1981-2002), and one man, Bill Davis (2002-2010),
have followed in her footsteps.

Lois Celeste (hired in 2010) is the active and engaged current director, under
whose able and energizing leadership upgrades in infrastructure & additions have
revitalized the center and its community partnerships.

Staff and volunteers also serve the seniors, welcoming people to the Center,
organizing events, handling correspondence, promoting activities, keeping the
lights on, the kitchen clean, and the snow shoveled. Their dedication helps raise
spirits and energy levels.

Growing from just one full time and one part-time staff member in 2010, the
Center today has 2 full time and 9 part-time staff members.
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Today’s team includes Colleen Kelley, Special Events & Program Coordinator, advocates Lisa Higgins and Janice Reada, Traci Jersen in marketing, Johann Miller for finances and facilities, Nicole Buck in the Business Center, and Kris Wurl and Karen Armstrong, who coordinate volunteers and trips, respectively, and Michelle Hicks at the front desk.
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The Center’s goals and activities

“People who stay young despite their years do so because of an active interest that provides satisfaction through participation.”
Dr. William C. Menninger, psychiatrist (quoted The Saratogian, 3/20/1955)

“The right hobby may help to compensate for the loss of a former skill, and it may provide one of the best means of keeping older people physically and mentally alert…Besides providing much-needed funds, the sale of an item provides the individual with evidence that society still feels he can contribute…For a great number of older adults, the value of a hobby lies in actively demonstrating to themselves that they are still able to create.” Jerome Kaplan, *A Special Program for Older People* (University of Minnesota Press) (cited in The Saratogian, 3/20/1955)

What does it do? It encourages members to take part in interesting activities and helps them maintain their usefulness in the community. It helps spread information about employment opportunities, medical care, hospitalization, recreation, housing, pensions, social security, etc. It aims to coordinate agencies and groups working with Seniors into a program of mutual helpfulness.” (Senior Center, 1960s welcome brochure)

From the beginning, Golden Age Club programs emphasized active learning through hobbies and social activities. Initial meetings included readings, literary discussion, and an interest in developing public speaking. They continued in this vein as the Social Club when the Senior Center was founded in 1957.

The Center’s members also contribute to the community, supporting Christmas and Easter seals drives in the early years, helping with blood drives, and through the “Sunshine Club” visiting “shut-ins,” generally older and infirm seniors who cannot attend center events.
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1960s: “Senior Center is an Active Place”

“We thought the formation of the Citizens Center somewhat rash. But when you take a look around at what has happened to some people, who have had to turn to the County Home or been sent to nursing homes, you realize that many of the elderly are indeed the forgotten and need whatever can be done for them...”

Editorial, The Saratogian, May 14, 1960

What is it? It is a place where older people can meet for friendship and fun. A daily schedule is maintained -- five days a week Monday through Friday -- featuring arts, crafts, entertainment, and community projects. .... How does I work? ..... Needs of people are practically the same at any age—needs for usefulness, companionship and activity.”

“Senior Citizens Center, Inc., Welcome” (ca. 1962)

“All citizens, regardless of race or creed, are welcome at the Center on Circular Street; free transportation is furnished for those who do not have means of their own to go there.” Presbyterian Church newsletter, 1968

By 1964, its fifth anniversary, the Center was open 5 days a week, 10 am – 4 pm, offering a “variety of programs... so that each person is able to find some activity of interest.” The list included ceramics, painting, chair-caning, rug-hooking, card playing, billiards, group singing and sewing. Events included hobby and flower shows, dinners and picnics, field trips and weekly movie screenings. Membership, having climbed over 100 people, was free to anyone 50 years of age or older.

In 1967, picnics at the Spa and Lake George, a fall foliage tour, a day at Expo 67 and Christmas shopping in Colonie were among the outings. And the Center’s contributions to the community continued – including assistance at the Blood Bank, addressing and stuffing envelopes for Easter and Christmas seal drives. Members, alongside Skidmore students, participated in the funding campaign for the “United Community Fund of Saratoga, Inc.” of which it was an agency.
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A New Center

In the mid-1970s, the still-growing Center, whose membership had reached around 250, was in need of a larger, more modern facility. The $380,000 new Center at 5 Williams Street opened in November 1978 and was dedicated in April 1979 with over 300 in attendance. Center President Robert Gass thanked the many who supported the initiative, which was funded largely by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Additional city and state funds, as well as substantial community contributions including from the Economic Opportunity Council which supported a kitchen and dining area for over-60s. Proceeds from sale of the 162 Circular Street property contributed as well.

In 1993, the Center added the Kilmer Pavilion using bequest funds from Margaret Kilmer of Greenfield to be used for classes, meeting and small parties. More recently, the Center added a carport and upgraded the entrance in 2012, along with less visible infrastructure changes.
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Fitness Knows No Age

[Mrs. Vokes] will be happy to meet there any county residents over 50 who are interested in a vital purposeful organization, with no yearly dues, with classes, trips, and food at cost, and with a hearty welcome for all”, Senior Citizens Center Has Active Program” Saratogian, May 8, 1969

“Yoga and ceramics are just a couple of activities at the center that promote mobility, creativity, and socializing” Center Looks to Senior Health, 2012

In an early 1960s welcome brochure, the Center invited centers to a place “where you may just “loaf,” tune in the radio or TV, read, play, games or just relax in company with friends, and to share talents and interests with “those less fortunate.”

Social activities from discussions and festive meals on the holidays to sewing, painting, ceramics and other crafts have been a mainstay from the Center’s origins and continue to engage seniors five days a week. Fashion shows also highlight seniors’ creativity.

Over the years, offerings for seniors have increasingly emphasized keeping physically active. Images and articles from the Center’s archives highlight a variety of aerobic activities – from square dancing and billiards to armchair aerobics, “gentle yoga” and Tai Chi. Performances continue to include singing; high-kicking dancers also have an opportunity to make an impact.
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Across the Generations

From the beginning, the seniors have connected to Saratogians across the generations. High school singers performed for the Golden Age Club in its early years, and more recently, a class created a sign for the center. Teaching is a two way street – sometimes seniors collaborate in intergenerational arts projects. At other times, the next generation offers technological advice.
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Financing the Center

How is it Financed? By voluntary associations, interested private individuals, clubs, City and State Contributions 1960s Welcome brochure

These budgets from the Center’s past show both constant support from state, city and county agencies and organizations, and a constant need to rely on private donations and grants to provide for area seniors.

Since 1957, the Center has raised funds for its activities, and also received city and state funding. The United Fund (now United Way) has been a major supporter from the early years. But individual donations have always made a huge difference. A fundraising or “dunning” letter sent in summer 1959 urged support for the over 1900 people over 50 in Saratoga County, urging support especially for those over 65, who face “serious economic problems” and will benefit from a “special place” where they can “meet new friends of their own age and interest…share hobbies…[and] learn ways to be constructive and thoughtful and useful citizens.” (Dunning Letter, 7/16/1959)

As it got started, the Center had an annual budget of less than $6,000 per year in 1961 (about $47,000 today) and almost doubled by 1981. The Center’s annual budget has more than quadrupled since 2010, from $120,000 to $560,000 to support a wide range of programming.
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Heading into the Future

Since 1955 the mission of the Adult and Senior Center of Saratoga is to empower seniors to achieve and maintain personal independence and individual well-being by providing the program structure and support services necessary for healthy recreation, companionship, social involvement, and problem solving.

Saratoga Adult and Senior Center Website Mission Statement

By 1997, census figures put the number of seniors in Saratoga County at 21,036 people over age 65; 9137 over age 75; and 2204 older than age 85.

As the population of seniors grows, the Senior Center, now sixty years young, shows no signs of slowing down. In the past five years, membership has grown to an all-time high of over 1200 seniors. Over the next five years, Executive Director Lois Celeste plans to grow the Community Connections program to meet senior needs both in the Center and at home, and tackle space issues.

At the center of every new initiative, however, the underlying goal – to “empower seniors to achieve and maintain personal independence and well-being” – remains at the heart of the endeavor.