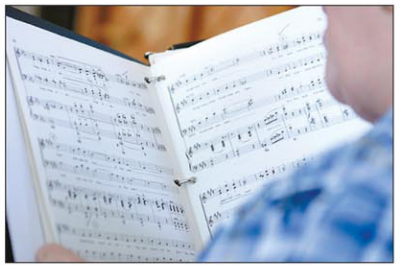
CELEBRATING 75 YEARS! **REACHING OUT, TOUCHING LIVES!**

Seniors stay active, fit with parks programs



BY KAREN L. HORNFECK
Special to the News & Record

It's a small but typical gym — the workout warriors go about their daily routines on treadmills, bikes and weight-training equipment.

But a closer look shows something a little different. All of those working out are over the age of 55. Welcome to the fitness center at the Smith Senior Center, part of the Greensboro Parks & Recreation's Seniors Unit, which sponsors activities for seniors 55 and better.

Smith Senior Center first became a dedicated senior facility in 1998, but helping residents stay active and involved isn't a new endeavor for Greensboro Parks & Recreation. "I would guess that the first seniors program started around 1952 as a '60-plus' club," says Cindy Hipp, Seniors Unit coordinator.

Back then, recreation centers scattered across town would offer different activities, like bingo or group trips, for seniors. Around the mid-1970s, the program started to grow. One of the first citywide programs to start was the Singing Senior Ambassadors. Actively performing for 25 years now, the group averages 24 participants each year and meets weekly to rehearse. Members perform public shows twice a year, and regularly sing at retirement homes and businesses.

Another activity that has remained popular is the Greater Greensboro Senior Games. Greensboro Parks & Recreation started sponsoring the games in 1987 with the goal of promoting mental and physical health by encouraging seniors to practice and participate in their chosen event throughout the year.

The games take place in April and early May each year, and include competitions in swimming, tennis, track, golf and cycling, as well as lower-intensity sports like boccie, croquet, bowling and horseshoes.

"We had a lady here this past year who is in her early to mid-90s," Hipp says. "She competes in boccie and shuffleboard and up until last year, she would bowl." Another man in his 90s is a competitive swimmer. Competitors finishing in the top three in each sport can go on to the state-level games in September. "This year, we had about 60 participants register going on to Raleigh," Hipp says.

But the objective of the Seniors Unit program isn't just fun and games. "Our goal is to keep seniors age 55 or better active, to keep them involved in something," explains Hipp, who works to meet the diverse needs of a growing senior population and offers an array of programming including book clubs, a hiking club, discussion groups, ballroom dancing, water aerobics, bingo and basketball. Day trips to nearby locations such as UNC-Chapel Hill's Morehead Planetarium and Science Center and the Seagrove pottery district are also well-attended.

One of the most popular programs is the senior aerobics program AHOY: Add Health to Our Years. Free classes are offered at locations throughout the area and have varying levels of intensity.

"One of the classes is all chair exercises because we were seeing more and more people who needed that," Hipp says.

Class sizes vary from a relatively small number of 12 participants to larger classes with an average of 40 participants at some locations.

While encouraging physical fitness is a main goal, offering seniors a social outlet also is important. Two participants found more than just a passing friendship. "We had a couple who met at the classes, started dating, and got married in late November," Hipp says with a smile. "They were in their mid- to late 70s."

Hipp and her staff continue to update programs to meet the needs of the growing population of senior citizens. Yoga classes were recently added on Tuesday mornings at the Smith Senior Center; they are taught by professionals who are skilled at teaching seniors who might not be familiar with yoga's practice or health benefits.

"Our motto is, 'Use it or lose it,' " Hipp says with a laugh.

She and her staff are dedicated to understanding the needs of Greensboro's senior population and encouraging active and healthy habits. And judging from the large numbers of seniors involved in their many programs, they are doing a great job.

PHOTOS BY NANCY SIDELINGER/Special Sections Photographer

The Parks & Recreation Department offers a variety of program for local seniors. The Singing Senior Ambassadors group performs at retirement homes, churches, area businesses and public concerts throughout the year. Julia Smith and Ila Ellington (a 20-year member) rehearse with the group at St. John's United Methodist Church.

Building a Foundation

BY JOHANNA REYNOLDS
Special to the News & Record

A relatively new organization already has an impressive résumé in the parks community.

The two-year-old Friends of Greensboro Parks & Recreation Foundation celebrated two important firsts in 2008, when it officially achieved nonprofit status.

The foundation negotiated the donation of a 5-acre parcel at the southwest corner of Friendly Avenue and Green Valley Road for green space, and it spearheaded a fundraiser golf tournament in October at the Bryan Park Champions Course. The inaugural tourney netted $3,800 and plans are in place to make it an annual event.

Both achievements meet the organization's goal of supporting the Parks & Recreation Department's programs, services and facilities by strengthening the agency's financial and volunteer resources.

Board member Ron Wilson thinks the foundation will help shape the city's future by giving residents, organizations and corporations a trustworthy place to donate money, leave bequests and make grants. "That in turn means we'll make use of those donations to provide the Parks & Recreation Department with the resources to go out and do things that they otherwise would not be able to do. And it's through that

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FIND OUT MORE

To learn more about the Friends of Greensboro Parks & Recreation Foundation, visit gsofriendsfoundation.org or call 373-2574.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The organization is led by a volunteer board of directors: Robert Douglas III, chairman; Kevin Green, vice chairman; Rose Marie Ponton, treasurer; Thomas Martin, secretary; Lori Galbreath, assistant secretary; and members John Hagan, Dr. James Sellers, Kathleen Treanor and Ron Wilson.