

A healthy, active life for seniors is goal

BY SCOTT SCANLON
REFRESH EDITOR

Melissa Abel has seen a shift in the dreams and desires of older folks since she became program director at the Amherst Center for Senior Services in 2001.

"Years ago, we would offer health programs," she said. "It could be on arthritis, breast cancer, anything, and we'd get hardly anybody coming. They were such taboos. Now, we can't offer enough of them. People want to do whatever they can to stay healthy in their home. They want to learn the latest thing, whether it's about gluten-free diets or vegan diets, or reflexology or massage — anything that they know it could help them feel better, live longer, have a more productive life."

The new attitude — that it's not enough to live long if you don't live healthy, too — is reflected in the dozens of programs the Amherst Center offers, said Abel, 47, who lives in the town and holds a bachelor's in gerontology from the University at Buffalo.

Not every senior is on board. Abel and her bosses know that although the center counts 9,000 Northtowners as members, nearly twice that many people 60 and over who live in Amherst have no connection to the facility. This comes at a time when isolation among Americans has been tied to higher rates of chronic physical and mental illness, dementia and death.

That's why the center will launch a new Senior Center on the Move in the coming weeks, with Abel's four-member staff at the helm.

Q. How will the program work?
We've had people tell us they can't get here, it's hard transportationwise. We have a lot of isolated seniors who, for whatever reason, stay in their apartment or a housing complex or home. We're trying to figure out why, and how to get those who are isolated to the center, whether it's for veterans' benefits or heating benefits or something else. We're going to pick a different senior housing complex monthly or bimonthly. We want to come out, talk about the center, what programs, classes and services we offer. We're going to bring a program to them so they get a little taste about what the center has to offer.

Q. What is the goal of the program?

On our end, we want to explain how much we have to offer here and how worth it that it would be able for them to come over. We're going to give away free vouchers for a van ride to



Melissa Abel, left, program coordinator at the Amherst Center for Senior Services, works with Deb Barbour, a member of the wood-carving club, one of more than 60 programs offered at the center. To join, you or your spouse has to be at least 55 years old.

Sharon Cantillon/Bufalo News

and from the center. We look to get some feedback about why they haven't been coming over: Is it physical, are they just not interested? We're starting with subsidized housing and are looking to go places where transportation has been an issue.

Q. Why did you decide to get into this field?

Mainly because of my grandmother, Elizabeth Osborne. I helped take care of her when I was in high school ... My family said I had such a knack for it. She had dementia. I understood when she would call me my cousin's names. This is what family does. You try to keep people at home as long as possible. Unfortunately, she had a heart condition and passed in 1986.

Q. Describe your job.

We handle membership. My staff members and I are the first ones called up front when new visitors come in. We give them a tour and, if they want to sign up, we help with paperwork. We try to figure out what brought them in. If they seem apprehensive, we start with a lunch

program and tell them, "Everyone has lunch." ... We've got people who take art classes who never picked up a paintbrush in their life and now participate in art openings with us. We schedule all of the events. We do 60-plus programs a month, whether it's health programs, concerts, educational, games, cooking. We are involved with all of our clubs. We are involved with all of our clubs, about 37 of them, whether it's Travel Group, Supper Club, Camera Club. They're all listed in our newsletter.

Q. What do you think are the biggest misconceptions about senior centers?

It's only about bingo and cards. Not that there's anything wrong with bingo and cards but there's so much more to offer. Some think people live here. We're asked, "Where are the bedrooms?" The stigma is that it's all older, frail people coming in and it's not. To join the center, you or your spouse has to be 55 years of age or older. If you live in the town of Amherst, it's a one-time \$30 fee to join. The added cost would be a class. A couple of our clubs also have fees.

They can ask our social workers if they qualify for fee waivers. Nonresidents pay \$30 per year plus the added costs. For all we offer, it's a bargain.

Q. How have things changed in terms of seniors' interest since you started?

When I first started, people would come and be here all day. They'd come out for lunch, hang out. More so now, a good portion of our younger set are in or out. They may come for a class or two and they're off doing something else. We have some people who still work, so they want later afternoon, evening programs we offer on Wednesdays. They're also much more likely to ask, "What else do you have?" They want to see as much as they can and be able to learn as much as they can."

Senior housing facilities, religious or civic groups in Amherst interested in a visit from Senior Center on the Move can contact Melissa Abel at 636-350, Ext. 3111 or email mabel@amherst.ny.us. To find senior services in Western New York, call 211 or visit 211wyo.org.