

Cooking classes, Nordic strolls appeal to Andover boomers

By Brian Goslow

ANDOVER — There's been some strange sightings in town: People walking through residential neighborhoods with Nordic ski poles — in the middle of summer. "We must look really funny," said Diana Tisbert, 54. "We look like 10 ducks in a row."

Tisbert is one of a growing number of participants in BoomerVenture, a program started by the town to attract residents to programs at the Andover Senior Center (ASC) and, as its website notes, to reach out to baby boomers to "think twice before cashing in their backyard barbecues for the carefree condos of Florida, Las Vegas or North Carolina."

Instructor Denise Boucher, 50, said the Nordic walking class gets people outdoors, walking the local streets and introducing them to parts of town that even many long-time residents have never visited. "Some of the people say, 'I've never been down that street before,'" Boucher said. "We went down to the bird sanctuary at Phillips Academy. Their kids had been there with their school but they hadn't ever gone there themselves."

This summer, the BoomerVenture Campus, also known as the Senior Center, 30 Whittier Court, offers indoor and outdoor classes, including Energize With Exercise, Serenity Yoga and Nordic Walking. A Boomer Book Club meets on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.

ASC's Assistant Program Coordinator and BoomerVenture Coordinator Karen Payne-



BoomerVenture instructor Denise Boucher with Nordic walking class participants Diana Tisbert and Chris St. Jean

Taylor said getting boomers to check out the center has been an ongoing battle the facility hopes to win, with programs created specifically for boomers. "It's such an important span of time that's full of transitions," she said. "There are a lot of needs to that age that we hope our programs will start to address."

The program has already created a greater awareness of ASC and a wider connection with the community. "We've started to see some doctors telling their patients, 'How

about trying this Serenity Yoga program they're offering?'" Director Kathy Urquhart said.

For Tisbert, Nordic walking, aerobics and yoga classes are intended to help with her arthritis, which she's had for over 30 years. "I've been pushed to take a yoga class and it's been great," she said, admitting that up to this point, "it's more fun than medicinal."

For many years, longtime town employee

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Karen Fay, 57, started her workdays at the gym. No longer. She now works out through BoomerVenture's Nordic walking and Energize With Exercise classes. The latter, which includes a weight-lifting session, helps build participants' strength and flexibility. "It's especially good for women for their bone density," Fay said. "The aerobics are great for that."

Along with the health benefits, Fay enjoys meeting other town residents. "It's people from all walks of life and we all get along and laugh," she said. "It gets boomers from 40 up to a couple that are in their 60s."

With almost a third of the town in its target audience — 5,500 of Andover's 30,000 residents are over 60 and another 4,500 over 50 — those connections are important to the center's continued success. Many of its residents commute to Boston, leaving rare chances to know one another.

"They have very little time," said Boucher. "They're squeaking in this workout."

Many of the walkers are in a transitional place in their lives as part of the sandwich generation. "While walking, they talk about their kids who are going to college or how they're becoming empty nesters," she said.

Not all programs involve exercise. The first two BoomerVenture offerings, Financial Fitness at 50 and Gourmet To Go, attracted three times as many people as anticipated last

fall and let Payne-Taylor know the center was onto something. "I had expected 10 to 12 people and I got about 40," she said.

Most participants are in their late 40s through 60s but there are also some "very active" seniors.

Four daytime Coping With Caregiving sessions in June also attracted large crowds. "Most were women but some men came in as caregivers," Payne-Taylor said. "This is a true sandwich generation. Some had children living at home or who are returning home. Some had parents needing care at home whom they were looking after from long distances."

The program was useful for Boucher in getting her to think about what she'd do should the need arise to look after her own parents. "I'm trying to prepare and be proactive," she said. "I've never had the opportunity to talk to so many caregivers at one time."

Payne-Taylor said the program has the full support of Andover Town Manager Reginald "Buzz" Stapczynski, who appreciates the budget efficiency of the program. "All of our programs pay for themselves," Urquhart said. "We charge a fee that covers the cost of the instructor and overhead. When we're open at night we have to have a custodian and cover the cost for that." Each seven-session summer exercise, yoga and Nordic walking



Boucher (r) with Payne-Taylor class costs \$45.

New BoomerVenture programs will be offered in the fall, including a sociology-based program on the power of ritual and how it's used to build strength in everyday living. Payne-Taylor is also considering a swing dancing class.

Its New Opportunities for Women series will include a life priority coach to help people focus on pre-retirement. "It'll be an extended program for men and women," Payne-Taylor said. "People pay hundreds of dollars for these services; ours are under \$50."

When the BoomerVenture program was introduced, Urquhart said some seniors thought it might lead to reduced services for them. "They asked, 'What about us?'" she

said. "I told them, 'We all get older one day at a time.'" Some boomers have since volunteered to assist regular senior center programming. At the same time, some seniors in their early 60s checked out the BoomerVenture book club. "They say, 'I'm really not a boomer but I'd like to try it out,'" she said.

Urquhart was optimistic the BoomerVenture program could encourage middle-agers to move to Andover. "It might attract new residents," she said. "Andover always has been known for its schools. I've always said wouldn't it be nice if Andover was also known for what it does for its over-50 and over-60 population."

With no advertising for the BoomerVenture program apart from its newsletter, local newspapers and word-of-mouth, those 10 odd-looking Nordic walkers are not only helping themselves but also the program. "It's great advertising," Boucher said of her charges walking past people working in their gardens at the end of the day. "We get a lot of questions and people who want to join us. They think we're going somewhere to ski. One person who had seen us came and registered the next session."

For more information on BoomerVenture, visit www.boomerventure.com or call Karen Payne-Taylor at 978-623-8321.

Contact
Karen Payne-Taylor
978 623-8321
kpaynetaylor@andoverma.gov

ASC
(Andover Senior Center)
36 Bartlett Street
Andover, MA 01810