A Place of Their Own

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By Bonnie Averbuch

Photo Credit: Tim Reiter

One of the things I appreciate most about being a nutrition intern at Food Bank For New York City is knowing that I have a hand in improving the health of people in the Harlem community. For the past several weeks I've been developing nutrition education and providing nutrition workshops at Food Bank's new senior center, which opened at our Community Kitchen and Food Pantry in Harlem in November 2012. The more time I spend talking to the seniors, the clearer it becomes to me that this program is definitely adding some spice to their lives.

Each day starts off with a hot breakfast at 9am and finishes with supper at 2pm. But it's the hours in between that add oomph to seniors' daily routines. They get to enjoy a variety of fun, engaging activities and every day is different. When seniors walk in the door, they might find Zumba, yoga or aerobics on the schedule to help them stay physically active. Or it could be an arts-and-crafts session. Perhaps they'll learn how to eat healthier in the nutrition class I provide that day or go on an outing to a museum. There's plenty of unstructured time too, when seniors can relax and read the paper, play cards and dominos, or simply sit and chat.

From what I can tell, they enjoy all of it--from the planned activities to the free time. When I talked to Alan, a 66-year-old regular at the center who loves writing poetry, he said that the artistic activities were his favorite way to spend the day. "It helps broaden my creativity," he told me. "I'm blessed to be able to come to a place that's an outlet for senior citizens with creative minds to sing, dance, and make art." There's even an upcoming art show where clients can display their work. Another senior I met recently, Katherine, is so excited for her friends' "oohs and aahs" that she's leaving her artwork at home until the day of the show so that she can surprise everyone.

Although some of the seniors have ideas for additional activities--Betty would like a movie night--it's obvious that they appreciate having a special place to spend their days. Everyone I talked to said it again and again. "It gives retirees something to do," Edith told me. "And that's important," her friend Christine chimed in. But the center is more than just a place to go--it's a place where elderly members of the community can learn, have fun, meet new people and make new friends.

"We enjoy socializing," Alan told me. "We get to know each other. We're on a first name basis." One of his new friends, Katherine, couldn't agree more: "I can't wait to get here every day," she told me with smile. I could have guessed that just by looking at her. The excitement and happiness on her face said it all.

Food Bank's Neighborhood Center for Adults 60+ is open Monday through Friday, 9am – 3pm.

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