

support

Providing Help and Camaraderie

By Amy Krause



Most of the North Shore Senior Center community is aware of the Center's engaging lectures, abundance of social activities and clubs, art studio and fitness offerings. What most people don't know about is the myriad support groups available to the community. Support groups are not only offered for older adults living with hardships and medical conditions that affect their lives, but also for their family caregivers.

"North Shore Senior Center has been a huge source of support to older adults and their family members for more than 60 years. Our support groups offer a safe place for people to share their joys and struggles as well as their knowledge and coping strategies with others who are experiencing similar issues," said Kathy Honeywell, director of Senior and Family Services.

Support Groups for Seniors:

PARKINSON'S

Peggy Froiz knew something was wrong when she was driving and her right leg became heavy and difficult to move. Shortly thereafter came the diagnosis: Parkinson's disease. That was 11 years ago. "I was devastated. I didn't know what it would mean for my future," she said. Since then, she's experienced all sorts of symptoms, including low energy, trembling, problems with movement and coordination and even "freezing" episodes. She found out about the Center's Parkinson's support group at an exercise class for people living with the disease and started coming to meetings four years ago. She says the group discusses everything Parkinson's related: from vision problems and loss of voice, to falling and balance issues, to which medications are most effective. "I've made unique friendships in the group because we are all going through similar changes in our lives and we help each other through it," she said. "The group has come to be an extended family for me."

Facilitator Tierney Wilson, LCSW, says the group is made up of people who range from newly diagnosed and in the early stages of the disease to those who have had it for years. The group meets once a week—family caregivers meet separately for the first hour and then the two groups come together for the last 30 minutes—and covers topics including the importance of exercise, nutrition and the latest research. Tierney recruits guest speakers whose specialties include speech, physical and occupational therapy, as well as music and art therapy. She said, "There's a strong camaraderie in the group. When you have a disease like Parkinson's it can become very isolating, but I want people to know they don't need to feel alone. Our group provides a place where others can relate to what you're going through."

Meets Wednesdays

2:00 – 3:30 p.m.

Arthur C. Nielsen, Jr. Campus

161 Northfield Rd., Northfield

Contact: Tierney Wilson at

twilson@nssc.org or 847.242.6241

HEARING LOSS

The Hearing Loss support group meets weekly and is made up of two components:

Speech reading—During the first hour, this unique class teaches people how to read lips and provides communication strategies for navigating loud environments and noisy crowds.

Sound Off—The second hour is when participants bring problems to the table, share coping ideas and successes, and learn about new assistive technologies.

The group is made up of a wide range of people, including those experiencing new hearing loss to those who have profound hearing loss. "Hearing comes into play in so many every day life situations, yet hearing loss is invisible and people tend to dismiss it. It's so important for connecting

groups

to Seniors and Their Families

with others and, without it, one can become isolated and depressed,” said Mary Blumer-Reed, LCSW, who led the group for the past seven years, but recently retired.

She noted that participants share tips on navigating social situations such as weddings and graduations. They also help each other learn how to communicate with doctors and audiologists, discuss which hearing devices work best, and share frustrations.

Bindy Bitterman began losing her hearing 30 years ago. She’s been attending the support group for ten years and finds it to be a very welcoming place of understanding and support. “I’ve learned that once you can come to terms with your own loss, you can give back and help others. We’ve developed some strong friendships in our group and always welcome newcomers.”

The Hearing Loss (HLAA) Chapter Meeting is held once a month and provides educational presentations by noted specialists who cover a variety of topics related to hearing loss, such as the connection between hearing loss and dementia; tinnitus or a ringing in the ear, which is a common problem for someone with hearing loss; and how to avoid isolation and manage depression.

Speech Reading

Meets Mondays

10:00 – 11:00 a.m.

Arthur C. Nielsen, Jr. Campus
161 Northfield Rd., Northfield

Sound Off: Hearing Loss Support Group

Meets Mondays

11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Arthur C. Nielsen, Jr. Campus
161 Northfield Rd., Northfield

Hearing Loss (HLAA) Chapter Meeting **Meets the second Monday of the month**

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Arthur C. Nielsen, Jr. Campus

161 Northfield Rd., Northfield

Contact: Tierney Wilson at

twilson@nssc.org or 847.242.6241

or Ana Pinshower at

apinshower@nssc.org or 847.784.6079

LOW VISION

Tom Patterson, whose vision problems started in his mid-twenties, has attended the Low Vision support group for the past ten years. At this stage of his vision loss, Tom can no longer watch television, read or write. In fact, he can see about only two feet in front of him. “Losing your vision is a frightening thing. The group gives me a place to learn new ways to cope and a chance to talk to others who have varying degrees of vision loss. There is lots of support in our group, and we share ideas on adjusting to the different stages of vision loss,” Tom explained.

Facilitated by Tom Giller, LCSW, and Shirley Bonilla, MSW, the support group consists of people with a wide range of vision loss: those with early stage vision loss to those who are completely blind. Three of every four meetings feature speakers who cover topics such as technologies to help with vision loss, phone apps, reducing fall risks at home, cooking challenges, emotional issues, the latest research findings, and access to support services.

“The goal of the group is to help people live as full a life as possible and reduce social isolation, which is a common challenge for people with vision loss,” said Tom Giller.

Meets the first Tuesday of the month

10:15 – 11:45 a.m.

Levy Senior Center

300 Dodge Ave., Evanston

Contact: Tom Giller at

tgiller@nssc.org or 847.866.5938

or Shirley Bonilla at

sbonilla@nssc.org or 847.424.5668

Support Groups for Caregivers:

GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Program provides emotional support, education, training, respite, financial counseling/assistance and case management services to grandparents raising their grandchildren. Currently, 33 active grandparents and 77 grandchildren, ranging from newborns to 18 years of age, are involved in the program and attend monthly support group meetings.

Diana Martin Logan, who takes care of three of her grandchildren, has been part of the program for ten years. Before she came to the program, she had a difficult time navigating the stress of raising her grandchildren. Through her participation in the group, she’s learned new skills and strategies to help cope with her circumstances, including dealing with DCFS, financial stress and isolation. “The group gives me support from others who are also raising their grandchildren, provides financial support and gives me some respite and time to think,” she said.

Case managers from North Shore Senior Center’s Niles Senior and Family Services department act as program facilitators. Guest speakers often are invited to address such topics as legal issues, discipline, self-care, services for children with disabilities, teen dating and understanding social media.

“The support group provides a space for empathetic, responsible caregivers to support and advise each other through their shared experiences of raising their grandchildren. Their character and compassion, as well as their support for each other, is what makes the group so special,” said Lexi Corcoran, LSW, co-facilitator of the group.

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**Meets the third Monday of the month
7:00 – 8:30 p.m.**

Levy Senior Center

300 Dodge Ave., Evanston

**Contact: Lexi Corcoran at
acorcoran@nssc.org or 847.424.5664
or Sarah Bogolub at
sbogolub@nssc.org or 847.424.5660**

FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUP

Beverly Richardson has been caring for her mother since she had a massive stroke in 1999 and then a cancer diagnosis in 2001. Beverly successfully held it together for years, raising her five children, taking care of her mom, and holding down a full-time job.

The breaking point was when her mom started waking up in the middle of the night unable to sleep, leaving them both exhausted. “I surrendered to the fact that I needed other people and more support,” she said. Upon joining the Skokie support group, she realized she wasn’t alone. “People are walking resources. When you hear someone else’s story and struggle, it helps. When you put your heads together, you gain a lot of power.”

The support group provides a place for caregivers of older adults to discuss caregiving issues and concerns in a non-judgmental atmosphere. Caregiver specialist Ben Ellenson, MSW, says the group consists of new and long-time family caregivers of parents and spouses. “The topics fluctuate depending on the participants’ issues and challenges. Sometimes it’s the difficulty in finding time for self-care; sometimes we talk about available resources or how to set boundaries. But every time, it’s a place of understanding for this group of people who are often overlooked.”

One of the most challenging situations for caregivers is finding time for themselves, noted Heather Resnick, MA, caregiver specialist, who runs caregiver workshops. “Most caregivers feel tremendous guilt in taking time for themselves, but it’s critical for them to get temporary relief from the stresses of caregiving.” Through the support group, family caregivers can learn about helpful resources such as respite services,

home-delivered meals, housekeeping assistance, transportation and assistance in applying for public entitlements.

After many years of solely caring for her family, Beverly finally took advantage of respite care. She encourages others, “I felt such an obligation to handle everything on my own. But after talking to others in the support group, I realized I didn’t need to do it all alone. I’ve finally got some balance back in my life.”

**Evanston Family Caregiver Support Group
Meets the first Wednesday of the month
3:00 – 4:30 p.m.**

Levy Senior Center

300 Dodge Ave., Evanston

**Contact: Ben Ellenson at
bellenson@nssc.org or 847.424.5661**

**Skokie Family Caregiver Support Group
Meets the fourth Wednesday of the month
10:00 – 11:30 a.m.**

Skokie Village Hall

5127 Oakton St., 2nd floor, Room D, Skokie

**Contact: Ben Ellenson at
bellenson@nssc.org or 847.424.5661**

ALZHEIMER’S FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

The Alzheimer’s group is for family member caregivers of people living with memory loss. This group is open to the community and is a place to find emotional support, share resources, and gain valuable educational information.

Mary Lu Osterberg, clinical manager at the House of Welcome and facilitator of the group, says the group provides a sense of community and belonging to those who take care of family members with memory loss. “The caregivers who come to our group have family members who have a broad range of memory loss,” explained Mary Lu. “Some are in the early stages of memory loss; others are in the later stages of Alzheimer’s or other dementias. It helps people to feel validated and know they are not alone. It’s also beneficial for support group participants to see a range so they get a bigger context to help them cope better.”

The group meets monthly and discusses topics

common to those living with dementia including sleep issues; loss of social interactions and friendships; caregiver loneliness; other family members’ involvement; issues dealing with driving, bathing, eating and medication of those living with memory loss; and deciding which services are needed.

Lou Becker has attended the Alzheimer’s Family Support Group for several years. As his wife, Loretta’s, dementia started to accelerate, his feelings of hopelessness and depression began to increase. “I felt so alone, but when I started going to the support group, there was a sense of relief . . . I realized I wasn’t alone. Other people were going through similar things, and then there were those who had already been where I was,” he said.

That was five years ago. Today, Lou has a caregiver who comes to the house several mornings a week and helps with Loretta and with chores around the house. Loretta also spends five days a week at the House of Welcome Adult Day Services day program, where she enjoys therapeutic activities and social stimulation. This gives Lou a peace of mind and some time to exercise, run errands, see friends and volunteer at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

“I’ve come full circle in the support group. At first, I came to get advice from others. Now, I’m often the one offering advice and encouraging participants to take care of themselves so that they can take care of their loved ones. If you’re even just thinking about joining a support group, know that you have nothing to lose and everything to gain,” he said.

**Meets the second Tuesday of the month
1:00 – 2:30 p.m.**

Arthur C. Nielsen, Jr. Campus

161 Northfield Rd., Northfield

**Contact: Mary Lu Osterberg at
mosterberg@nssc.org or 847.242.6277**

MIND MATTERS FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUP

This support group is open only to family members of participants of Mind Matters, a program for people living with early stage memory loss. See story on page 7. ■