

Vietnamese seniors enjoy companionship, culture at Worcester Senior Center

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WORCESTER — The story of immigrants or refugees coming to this country for safety and a better life is a strong part of the American identity. But what about that story's epilogue?

In the 1990s, said Amy Waters, director of the Worcester Senior Center, many Vietnamese refugees arrived in Worcester with their families. "But children grow up and senior citizens become isolated," said Waters. Their children would have been able to adapt and learn English, "but the older folks would have a tougher time," she said. This social isolation is often compounded with a "background of trauma from the war and very harsh situations," said Waters.

The Senior Center always had the values of being open for all, but in 2006, an employee whose own mother had come from Vietnam recognized the need to provide a gathering place for elders in her community. Now 17 years later, Vietnamese Elder days are a key part of many seniors' Thursdays.

"Even though there is more choice now, we have quite a dedicated group who make time on their Thursday to come and see their friends," said Waters.

The Vietnamese Elder days were one of the first of their kind before other cultural organizations like Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts or adult-aid programs. It started slowly with one or two attendees and within a month there were 80 people, said Waters. This group even made sure to stay in touch during the pandemic, before Zoom was set up, the WSC organized a massive conference call of over 60 people.

Food is an integral part of culture, and Quinsigamond Community College operates a diner that caters Vietnamese meals on Thursdays, and visitors can even provide specific recipes and “QCC can make that happen,” said Senior Services Assistant Lan Le. Every other Thursday sees a delivery of produce from SEACMA, letting seniors take home fresh vegetables.

Le took over running the program six months ago. Her job is to organize activities such as tai chi and book speakers, and is helping the seniors prepare as September is multicultural month at the Senior Center. As a result, August has been a flurry of preparation and planning as Worcester’s senior citizens work together alongside senior center staff to prepare to showcase both their heritage and the city’s diversity.

Vietnamese Elder Cultural Day on Sept. 21 will include a fashion show and chorus performance. “They enjoy singing,” said Le. “We always start each meet-up with a welcome song and end with a goodbye song.”

The center is not just fun and games, though, and helps seniors, especially non-English speakers, deal with a number of social services, whether it’s insurance, medical, financial issues, benefits, legal referrals or even sorting their mail.

“They can bring in a pile of mail and we’ll help them sort through the junk and find what’s important,” said Le.

In future, Le and Waters are hoping to bring back collaboration activities with SEACMA in organizing intergenerational activities such as a karaoke night.

“I always tell them as long as you get out of the house and are involved in something, it’s a good thing,” said Le.