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NEIGHBORS

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More is more at Mather's senior cafes

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When 67-year-old Sandy Swift's husband died from liver cancer three years ago, it was hard for her to be suddenly alone.

She tried to remember all the good times she had with her husband, but when asked what it was like to live without him right after he died, she replied "not too nice."

That all changed when Swift, of Edison Park, happened upon Mather's More Than a Cafe, a Norwood Park cafe and activity center, at 7134 W. Higgins Ave., geared to people older than 55.

The cafe serves omelets and cobb salads all day long, but as the "more" in the name implies, it also offers piano, computer and chair-exercise classes, field trips to shows such as "Jersey Boys" and a host of speakers like Franz Schulze, a professor emeritus from Lake Forest College, who recently gave a lecture on the international importance of Chicago architecture.

Taking part in Mather's classes and simply hanging out with new people has helped Swift overcome her loneliness. In fact, she's been so busy taking piano lessons and heading up the center's walking club that she's forgotten about her own problems, she said. Today, Swift goes to the center at least three times a week for four hours at a stretch.

The Evanston-based operating foundation, Mather LifeWays, runs three Mather's More Than a Cafe centers in Chicago. In addition to the one in Norwood Park, there are also centers in Portage Park and on the city's South Side.

"We believe that if you do give it a try, you'll leave with a feeling of renewal," said Betsie Sassen, executive director of cafe development at Mather LifeWays.

The foundation is an outgrowth of an endowment left by Alonzo Mather, who started a wholesale business in Chicago and ultimately made his fortune developing a humane stock car for the shipment of livestock. Upon his death in 1941 Mather left his fortune to the Alonzo Mather Aged Ladies Home in Evanston, Sassen said. During the years, the endowment grew and Mather LifeWays added additional



Sandy Swift carefully makes her move as she plays against chess-club president Joe Vazzana on the afternoon of Nov. 8 at Mather's More Than a Cafe, 7134 W. Higgins Ave., Chicago. Swift, who started playing chess about a year ago, also takes piano lessons.

— Allen Kaleta/For Pioneer Press

senior-living buildings, including the three centers.

While the foundation chose its name to honor its founder, the name also accurately describes what's going on inside the centers, Sassen said.

The centers may revolve around the food, but those in the know will tell you they are much "more than a cafe."

"If somebody is lonely they can come here," said 74-year old Herta Fischer, a retiree from the city's Far

Northwest Side, who started coming to the Norwood Park center four years ago after she "got bored at home." Fischer now spends about 20 hours a week both working at the center as a part-time cashier and spending time there afterward on the computers.

The centers are different from traditional senior centers because they reject the premise that seniors are frail, Sassen said. Rather than operate under the framework that people become sick or debilitated as

they age, Mather's wanted to develop a place where those older than 55 could take advantage of their senior years, "which for many people are just bonus years," Sassen said.

Walk into the center in Norwood Park and a warm energy fills the room as older adults gather in the main cafe area. To the right of the cafe is a small multipurpose room where the center hosts exercise classes, art shows and movies. Be-

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hind that space is a computer lab that is open to the public, but those over age 55 get first dibs.

On a recent Monday morning Swift sat at a cafe table playing chess with 72-year-old Bill Martinek, of Park Ridge, while Martinek's wife, Linda, took a chair-exercise class.

Martinek likes everything about the center, especially the computer classes, he said. He has been to oth-

er senior centers, like those in Niles and Park Ridge, but he likes Mather's better because it is smaller and more intimate.

After two years at Mather's taking piano lessons, Swift has gained confidence in herself. When she goes to parties and people ask her to play music it just "makes you feel better," she said.

She always tries to make new friends at the center, and if she sees someone sitting alone, she approaches.

"Because sometimes all they need is an ear," she said.



Joyce Nitsche gets a chess lesson the afternoon of Nov. 8 from chess-club president Joe Vazzana at Mather's More Than a Cafe, 7134 W. Higgins Ave., Chicago. Senior citizens visit the cafe for reasonably priced meals and chess on Wednesdays. See page 65 — Allen Kaleta/For Pioneer Press