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Lynn program offers activities for seniors

By Matt Belliveau / For The Item

For nearly five years, the Lynn-based program The Front Porch has offered local seniors a variety of social, educational, health and wellness programs. But with the group facing a massive budget cut that slashed its finances in two, the program's directors have begun searching for alternative methods of aiding the elderly.

Currently in its pilot phase, The Front Porch is now reaching out and into the homes of local seniors with its new initiative, Beyond the Front Porch, offering seniors free interactive programming over the phone using a conference call service.

"Many of our seniors are unable to get to the programs offered by The Front Porch due to a number of reasons such as transportation difficulties, health issues or simply because they're caring for someone else," said Susan Berliner, The Front Porch's program manager.

Following in the footsteps of much larger programs in New York and California, Berliner says programs like this aim to help the elderly avoid feeling isolated in their homes. According to Berliner, a third of the conference calls will be led by volunteering seniors themselves.

"We're always looking for ways to play up the assets of others," said Berliner. "There's a lot of talent out there, we'd like to offer people an opportunity to share it."

The program, offered to all North Shore residents over the age of 60, will include a variety of social and educational offerings, running in 30-minute sessions.

The program is a direct extension of The Front Porch, which aids seniors living in the Diamond District and Summit Estates with weekly activities, offering a wide array of classes that cover everything from Italian cooking to strength training through Yoga to guidance sessions that aim to offer helpful ways of making a home safer and easier to navigate.

According to Berliner, the benefit seniors gain from attending these courses has proved to be more than expected. One of the program's initial surveys found that its members desired a stronger relationship with their neighbors, a need that nearly all of its members felt was met by its activities.

Interaction, according to Berliner, can be a powerful remedy to feeling isolated and depressed, and possibly, physiological ailments such as Alzheimer's disease.

"While we haven't proved that it decreases the chances of Alzheimer's, we like to think all this interaction, exercising the brain, can't hurt," said Berliner.



Seniors participate in a yoga class at the Lynn-based program The Front Porch, which has offered local seniors a variety of social, educational, health and wellness programs for nearly five years.

Using the computer classes offered by The Front Porch, some seniors have grown comfortable navigating Web browsers and have become proficient with email.

"We had one woman who, through our classes, was introduced to computers at the age of 93. After a few lessons she was having full conversations with her grandchildren through email," said Berliner. "There's a great excitement that comes with learning or sharing something new, especially with seniors."

Berliner even introduced the class to the popular social networking Web site Facebook.

"They weren't very interested in that, though," said Berliner.

Instructor Kelly Annese has been teaching yoga at both Front Porch sites since Fall 2008. While yoga may be widely perceived as an alternative way to turn one's body into a pretzel, Annese's courses have incorporated gentle movements to her lessons that allow students to enjoy the benefits of yoga. Annese stresses students to "listen to their body" and obtains health information from each student prior to the start of class, building the exercise around those concerns. The yoga courses have been a huge hit with seniors, especially its Russian members. Annese even works to integrate Russian words into her instructions.

The Front Porch is a Massachusetts Naturally Occurring Retirement Community program of the Jewish Family Service in the North Shore. People of all faiths are welcome to join.

Beyond the Front Porch began in March with two sessions of mental aerobics and hopes to offer a broader array of sessions in April.