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Instructor Stella Hopewell, center, leads Norma Jean Johnson, left, and Verna Adams in the soul line dance class at Vintage in East Liberty.

Pierina Morelli for Print

Vintage senior center expands what it means to stay active

By Kim Lyons

On Friday afternoons at 1:30 the place to be in East Liberty is Stella Hopewell's soul line dancing class. The hip-hop music she plays to warm up the crowd belies the average age of the dancers, most of whom are in their 60s and 70s.

"This is my favorite thing to do at Vintage, and I'm good at it," says Tommy Roberts, 62, of the Hill District, as he warmed up for the class. "We do the dances as a team, and even if you don't know all the

steps, everyone will help you."

The class is one of the most popular at the Vintage senior center, and is evidence of the larger shift toward rethinking what it means to grow old.

For those who may have spent their working years seated behind a desk, their retirement years may be an opportunity to get into the best physical shape of their lives. Vintage also has a gym with workout equipment that includes treadmills and weight machines, and members have weekly access

to a personal trainer.

"The model used to be what we refer to as 'lunch and bingo,' you come for lunch and you stay for bingo," says Vintage executive director Ann Truxell.

While Vintage does offer bingo and lunch every day, it's joined a lot of other senior centers in the shift toward a much broader health and wellness model, with an emphasis on exercise and social health.

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Vintage expands what it means to be an active senior

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Indeed, the schedule of activities at Vintage are not necessarily what one might expect at a senior center (and in fact, they prefer the term “active adult” center). In addition to staples like cards and bingo, there are yoga and tai-chi classes, a billiards room, a book club, language classes and excursions to local cultural events.

“I like it because I have a voice,” says Norma Johnson, 70, of Crawford Square. “I like the dancing and the fellowship, but I like that there’s always something going on.”

Vintage Inc. was founded in 1973, and is housed in a former Giant Eagle on North Highland Avenue in East Liberty.

Its members pay an annual fee of \$25, and the center serves about 130 people daily, Truxell says. It has a staff of 13, many of which have been with Vintage for a long time. Truxell, who’s worked there for 16 years, jokes that she’s considered the new kid.

Vintage’s largest sources of funding are the United Way of Allegheny County, the Allegheny Department of Human Services, and the Pennsylvania Department of Aging.

The center has annual revenue of about \$1 million, according to its tax forms, and its 2015 merger with the much larger Familylinks organization is allowing the center to grow beyond the community senior center model.

Truxell says as baby boomers continue to retire, senior centers are taking on a new identity as social hubs.

“We’re more likely to be socially isolated as we age because we start losing our cohort group,” Truxell said. When a spouse dies or adult children move away, a senior’s social universe starts shrinking, which leads to high depression rates among older adults.

“The other thing that leads to that isolation is losing activities that you love, for instance going to the theater. It’s not really a solitary activity.”

To that end, Vintage organizes shopping trips and visits to restaurants and local cultural events, which are chosen and voted on by a committee of the center’s members.

The schedule of upcoming trips includes a visit to Kennywood, another to see “The 39 Steps” at the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, an excursion to the Pittsburgh Zoo and PPG Aquarium and a Sunday brunch cruise on the Gateway Clipper.

Vintage also offers speakers from places like the Pennsylvania Department on Aging and the University of Pittsburgh, who discuss topics on healthy living and eating, everything from cooking with seasonal foods to how to avoid an injury from a fall.

The nondescript Vintage building is not much to look at on the outside, but the interior is light and airy, with skylights that flood the entryway with natural light. Upon entering, members scan their keytag on a computer terminal, and choose from a touch-screen menu of events going on that day.

Program director Tom Sturgill says the activities let seniors be as active and social as they choose, but all are designed to be unthreatening and welcoming.

“Even when you first come here, you’re not a stranger for very long,” he said.

Vintage is one of only two facilities in Western Pennsylvania to be accredited by the National Institute of Senior Centers. (Age Well at the JCC in Squirrel Hill is the other). This may not mean much to its visitors, but Truxell says it gives a legitimacy to the center’s offerings and programming.

For Vintage members, the sense of independence they have in choosing their own schedule is key.

As she walked on a treadmill on a recent afternoon Toni Yates, 67, says she comes five days a week.

“At my age you gotta keep moving,” she says. “They have good activities and good members here. It’s the best.”

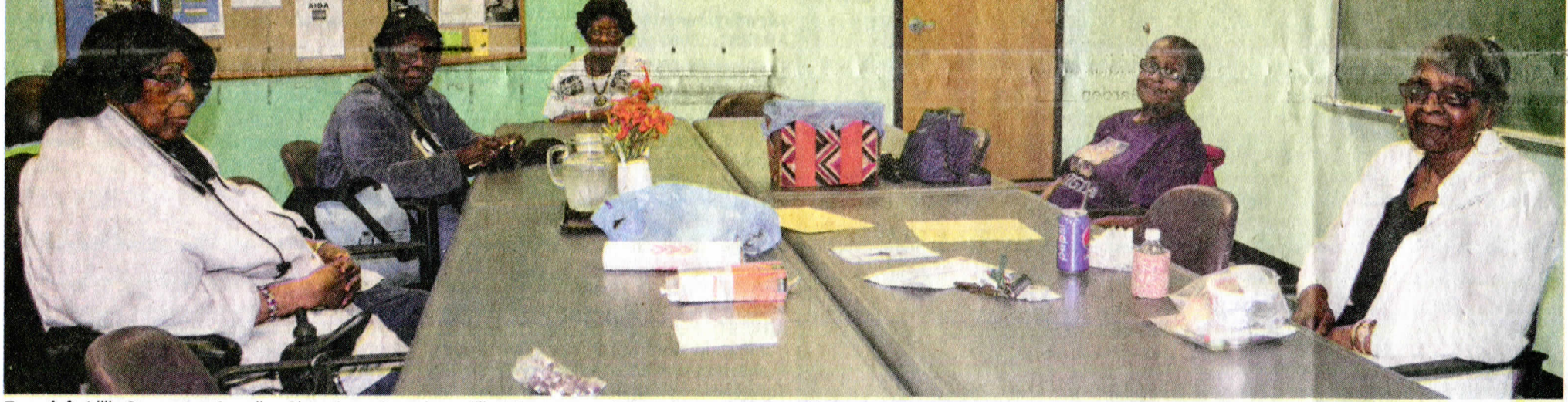


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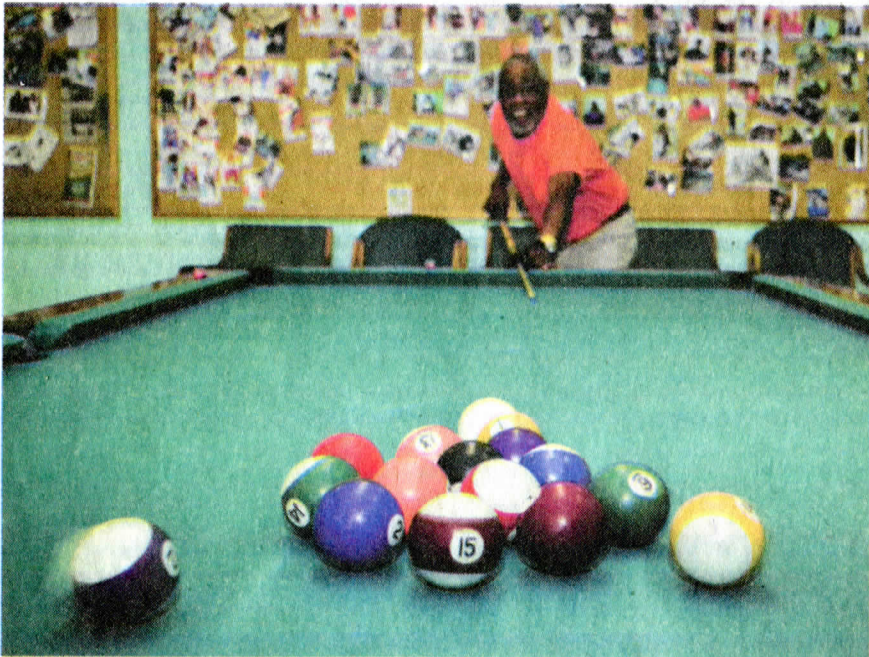


Marlene Davis, left, visits her mother Naomi Tallon, right. Dorothy Johns, center, has been joining Johns at Vintage for several years.

Photos by Pierina Morelli for Print



From left: Lillie Stevenson, Angeline Sims, Anne Saunders, Lillian Simmons and Ida Quinn work on sewing and knitting crafts at Vintage.



Edgar Carr is proof that the billiards room is a popular place at Vintage.



Bid Whist, which is played similarly to Bridge, has a loyal following.



This group says they play cards every day, whether it's Pinochle or Bid Whist.