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Travel: Garf and Beverly Cooper paddle past the icebergs on a Windstar Alaska Cruise.



Family: Marlies Jancso, of Village of Carolin, had a visit from daughter Cindy, of Ft. Lauderdale, and granddaughter Madison, of Olive Branch, MS.

Villages Health Facilitates Connection With New Classes

The latest classes offered allow people to come together and bond over a shared activity.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Forming new friendships and fostering better connection are the goals with The Villages Health Learning Center's new classes.

The Villages Health Learning Center recently introduced a new category of classes called Connections, which encourages social interaction through activities in small group settings.

It offers bingo, cooking, team Jeopardy, a trivia game called Friend Feud and more, but instead of competing, the only prize to be won are the connections participants make with others. The Connections classes are offered at least three times a month, and it hosted bingo Aug. 21 at Brownwood Care Center.

"I wanted to meet somebody

different, because my dog has started to look at me kind of funny," said Corinne Lemus, a Wildwood resident and member of Monday's Connections: Bingo class.

Lemus wanted to attend Connections because of the recent passing of her husband. Though not a Villager herself, she wants to take advantage of more activities she can do in The Villages and the surrounding community.

"I just thought it would be nice to get out and do something else," she said.

As a patient of The Villages Health, Lemus gets updates on the many classes offered through the learning center. She knows how big bingo is in the community because her parents live in the Village of Belle Aire. However, she's been nervous about putting herself out there because there are so many established groups.

It's a sentiment Jennifer McElraff, of the Village of Monarch Grove, shares. She said it can be difficult to find new friends.

Both Lemus and McElraff

have longed for a place where it's encouraged for people to mix it up and open themselves up to connecting with others. Lemus is also of the opinion that she needs the extra social interaction to strengthen her mind, which she said isn't working like it used to. Thankfully, Connections was created to address all of this.

"We're building it out," said nurse Melissa Denham, a dementia care specialist at The Villages Health and leader of Monday's Connections class. "This is brand new, and the goal for us is to pull in people who don't want to go into these large groups at the recreation centers and in the community, because that can be overwhelming."

The class starts off with every member introducing themselves and talking about their hobbies and interests. Among the players was a quilter, a crafter, a swimmer and a cancer survivor. Together they played a few standard rounds of bingo, but with a twist — winners get to interrogate fellow players.



Wildwood resident Corinne Lemus, left, and Bonnie Marburger, right, of the Village of Linden and assistant with The Villages Health Dementia Care Coordination program, finish the last round of Connections: Bingo.

Taylor Strickland,
Daily Sun

Each player is given a list of unique questions they can ask to get to know each other better. Questions include classic icebreakers such as favorite things about one's hometown, least favorite chores, best hometown food and qualities players liked most about themselves. A group leader like Denham is always close by to facilitate deeper discussion.

Unlike many bingo games, distractions are encouraged after the end of each round. Players reminisce about the past and commiserate with each other over shared experiences. Players were all smiles by the end of the class and already planning the next Connections class they would attend.

"I'm glad I came," McElraff said. "It was fun. I enjoyed it."

Like most classes offered through The Villages Health Learning Center, Connections classes are free to attend. Up next is the cooking class at 2 p.m. on Sept. 12 at Brownwood Care Center. To register, go to tinyurl.com/226sns3w.

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