

New horizons await seniors gathering at Mercy Center

By Mary Harmala
social writer

Enter Mercy Center through the "green doors" on any weekday between 10 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., and what you see there just may shatter some stereotypes about "old people."

Peeking into the gym, you may discover as many as 120 senior adults stretching and straining through a variety of unusual exercises to music. Maybe you'll see a group enjoying an energetic game of volleyball or concentrating intensely on learning karate. Or perhaps you'll catch sight of some dancers practicing the steps to the song "Elvira" by the Oak Ridge Boys.

Or you'll choose to enter the pool area, where individual seniors might be swimming laps, working toward prestigious membership in the Over 100 Mile Club. Others will be undergoing water therapy with a registered physical therapist. Many are simply enjoying the pool as a place to socialize and have fun.

"I feel like it's my second home," says Leola Rammel, 78, one of more than 100 senior volunteers who help with the program. Her eyes light up and a smile breaks across her face as she names dancing and exercise as her favorite center activities.

Across the hall is a large multi-purpose room where you will find senior adults playing cards or Bingo, expressing their creative talents in a crafts or oil painting class, or attending a Golden K Club meeting (senior Kiwanis Club). People in a choral group are practicing for an upcoming musical production. Others are listening to a speaker from the American Heart Association, watching a movie, or "dancing up a storm" — with a senior adult band providing the music. If it happens to be midday, many people are chatting amiably while enjoying a hot, nutritious meal.

SINCE FALL 1977 when the senior center first opened at 28600 Eleven Mile, just east of Middlebelt, it has been a magnet and a haven for area adults, 55 years and older. Some come only occasionally, while others are there five days a week.

"The nicest thing is you get received so friendly here," says 93-year-old Godfrey Wanek, an avid participant in the oil painting class. "They call you by your first name — I came in. They started kissing me!" he exclaimed. Wanek also enjoys having lunch at the center and swimming several times a week.

Supervisor Loretta Conway calls the facility a "multi-purpose center where many people come together to have their needs met." They come for friendship, lunch, recreation, information and help. Senior adult specialist Maggie Lortadis says that "for a lot of the seniors, it's their place."

Although the program began in 1974 as a rather "shirt-sleeve operation," using an American Legion Hall as a meeting place, it grew so much in popularity and in the scope of its offerings to seniors, that a move in 1977 to a larger facility became necessary.

A barrier-free site with more space,

as well as a swimming pool and gymnasium, Mercy Center has proven to be an ideal location for a senior adult center. Another advantage of the new facility, says Conway, is that more men began to attend because of the pool and the gym.

Although Conway has been the main impetus behind the program, she feels that much of the credit should go to Lortadis, who has served in a variety of capacities since 1976, becoming senior adult specialist in 1978.

Both women will be receiving bachelor of social work degrees from Madonna College this May, each with a double

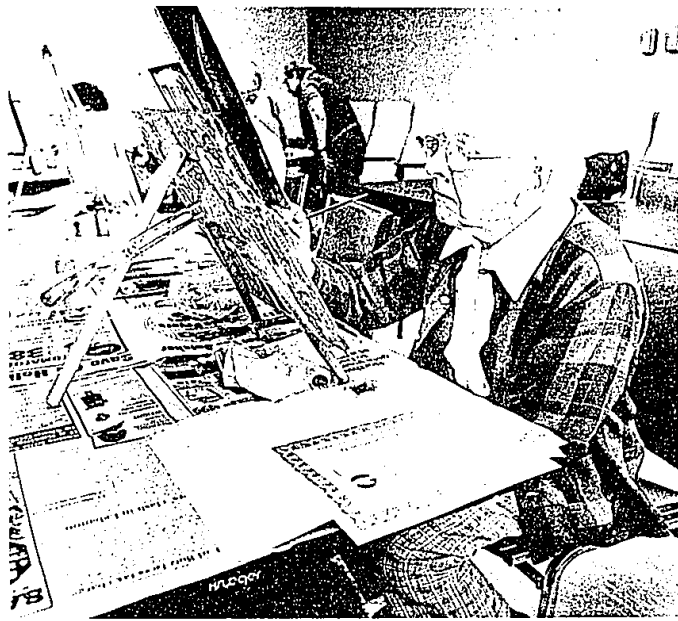
major in gerontology and social work. The senior adult program is administered from the Farmington Hills City Hall, although some of the funding comes from the city of Farmington as well.

Doug Gaynor, director of Farmington Hills Special Services, calls it a "well-received program," judging by the large number of seniors who take advantage of its varied services and activities. According to Gaynor, the two cities have gradually had to increase their financial support of the program as it has grown.



photos by RANDY BORST/Staff photographer

Leola Rammel, a regular visitor at the Gathering Place, was one of the torch bearers at the 1980 Senior Olympics.



Godfrey Wanek, 93, finds that oil painting is an enjoyable way to pass the time.

They find good reason to help many others

Although the community does offer a great deal to seniors, seniors are finding ways of "giving back" to the community as well.

Yvonne Singer, coordinator of "community service," reports that the seniors donate many handmade products to the Goodfellows every year. In addition, they regularly make layettes, consisting of blanket, kimono, booties and bib, to give to Hutzel and Botsford hospitals.

At least 1,000 items per year go out from the senior center to the community, according to Singer.

Also, many seniors volunteer to assist other seniors by driving to the doctor's or shopping and by delivering hot meals to the homebound. The Golden K Club also undertakes various projects to help other seniors.

Many seniors at the center just enjoy helping out with the day-to-day running of the program. For example, Mary Marshall, 73, serves meals at lunchtime. She also greets people when they arrive at the center and helps them feel welcome. Leola Rammel, 78, and Pauline Petricca, 65, both are agile and energetic leaders who assist Maggie Lortadis with the exercise class.

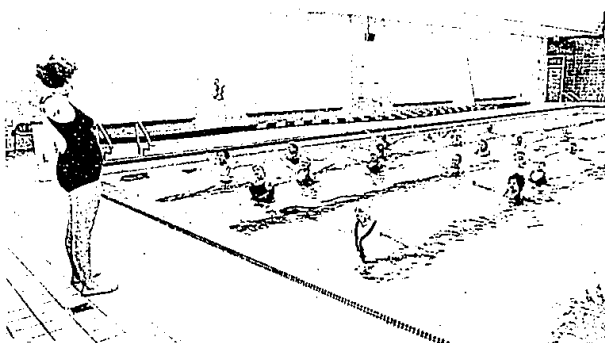
Pauline's husband John, 69, is a volunteer in charge of mailouts, Bingo, SEMTA-LD's and rounding up other volunteers. His attitude about helping out is, "We don't work, we just enjoy



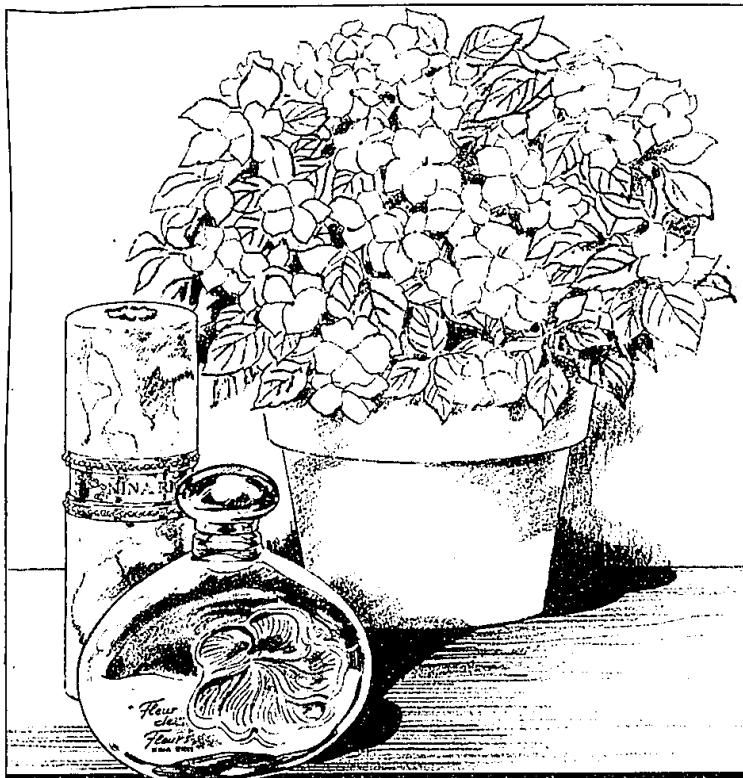
Loretta Conway

what we're doing." Virginia Loeschke, 60, who assists with the dancing and exercise classes, says that "volunteerism is like a job; it's a commitment." People have to be reliable, she says, es-

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Gerontologist Maggie Lortadis (left) conducts a swimming class at Mercy Center.



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