

Oak Ridge seniors get a permanent center

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 30, 2019)

On Thursday, September 26, 2019, the new Oak Ridge Senior Center opened its doors to anyone 50 years old or older with a soft opening. The new building is located next to the Oak Ridge Civic Center (where senior citizens have been gathering for various activities) in A. K. Bissell Park. The grand opening will follow at a later date in October.

The center, which was designed by Jacene Phillips of Knoxville-based Studio Four Design, has a multipurpose room, exercise room, pool room, craft room, lounge, meeting rooms and food service area.

The Senior Center Manager is Linda McGhee, a staff member of the City of Oak Ridge Recreation and Parks Department. Below is a brief history of the Senior Center by Carolyn Krause. Enjoy learning about the history of this important element of our Oak Ridge citizens and the new facility for their use.

Fifty-seven years ago, an unknown number of elderly Oak Ridgers met at the Wildcat Youth Center, also known as the Wildcat Den (where the Oak Ridge History Museum is now). The goal of the "social party" on Tuesday, Jan. 30, 1962, was to "establish a senior-citizens' center and program," which were billed as "non-political and non-denominational." The emcee was Gilbert Scarbrough. The social party included music, refreshments and a meeting followed by discussion.

The charter members of what was called the Oak Ridge Senior Citizens Club decided to formalize the new organization with a constitution. The club, which met every Tuesday, approved the constitution, on Tuesday, Oct. 9, 1962. It stated that the purpose of the club "is for the enrichment and entertainment of its members. These may be accomplished in suitable games, movies and any other programs and/or activities the Club desires."

The officers – president, vice president, secretary and treasurer – were elected to one-year terms in November. Dues "shall be a free will offering at each meeting," stated the constitution, which called for four standing committees – Program, Membership, Publicity, and Hospitality. The constitution did not state the minimum age for senior citizens desiring to join the club.

Bringing senior citizens together to form friendships and have fun seemed to be the chief objectives of the Senior Citizens Club in the 1960s. During their 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. meetings every Tuesday, they celebrated birthdays, dressed up as hobos in the hope of winning a prize, played card and board games, sang folk songs accompanied by an accordion, traveled to Cove Lake Park, brought covered dishes to provide lunch for all and ate Thanksgiving dinner (featuring "turkey with all the trimmings") at Oak Terrace restaurant in Grove Center. In December they had a Christmas covered dish luncheon during which they sang Christmas carols and gave a Christmas present worth a dollar to each attendee based on a drawing.

Over the years, as the seniors met at temporary centers in the Wildcat Den, Daniel Arthur Rehabilitation Center and the Oak Ridge Civic Center, new services were provided, such as exercise and dance classes and pool (billiards) tournaments.

In its September 5, 1996 edition, The Oak Ridger included a special section called "Silver Salute." It featured an article on Alzheimer's disease by Tammy Pietrzak, a local nurse. Among the many ads in the section were photos of Senior Citizens Center members such as Laverne Elder (showing the 13-piece ceramic Nativity set she made from family jewelry), Hassie Harrison playing the guitar and Ed and Pearle Sise acting out a skit as "Grandpa and Minnie Pearl" at the Anderson County Fair.

The section stated that, in the year 1995-96, 3,260 different seniors participated in the center's activities or received its services. Many seniors enjoyed the center's birthday party, picnic, Christmas party and Volunteer Appreciation Day. They played card games, such as Bridge and Canasta, and enjoyed ballroom and line dancing. There were bowling and golf leagues, low-impact exercise and Tai Chi classes, as well as senior game competitions, including a pool tournament.

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In 1996 seniors were offered flu shots, blood pressure screenings, income tax return preparation assistance and the 55-ALIVE Mature Driving Training session, which enabled those completing the class to lower their insurance premiums. Services provided by volunteers included transportation assistance to fellow seniors, calls to homebound residents and referrals to connect seniors with the programs and services they needed. The center was also used for regular meetings by different groups of retirees, including federal, city and school employees.

Over the years, the center directors were Obie Hennegar (deceased), Janice Thomas (a Clinton resident and quilter), Lou Jones (a regular attendee and once the winner of the Best Decorated Hat prize during an Anderson County Fair Senior Citizens Day attended by former U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp) and Ann Stuck.

In her research into the history of Oak Ridge Senior Center's various locations and evolution of leadership and direction, Carolyn also learned some details of the move into the new location:

The three pool tables and two snooker tables at the Civic Center will be moved to the new Senior Center. Covenant Health is providing exercise equipment for the exercise room. The center has new furniture. A few months ago, the Oak Ridge City Council authorized the purchase of the furniture at a cost not to exceed \$100,000; the source of the funding is the city's bond issue for the center construction project.

Pat Gengozian, chair of the Senior Advisory Committee, said that the center will provide not only entertainment and opportunities for socializing but also exercise classes, recreation (including pool tournaments) card games, bingo, arts and crafts. There will also likely be useful educational classes such as defensive driving, financial planning and avoiding scams and other attempts by people to exploit seniors for financial gain.

Gengozian hopes that the center will provide services requested by seniors. "One of the most requested activities is line dancing," she said. "Dancing and other physical exercise are important because they may prevent falls and reduce the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

"Making and enjoying the comfort of friends at the Senior Center are important because social isolation can lead to depression and cognitive impairment," she added. "The Senior Center staff hopes to offer enough diversity in programming that will appeal to every senior in some way. Payments for food and other services such as transportation may be on a sliding scale so that all seniors feel they can use the services offered."

Thank you, Carolyn, for another excellently researched and well written insight into yet another important aspect of Oak Ridge's history. Our seniors are among our most important elements of the uniqueness that is Oak Ridge. It is with pride that I see this new Senior Center opening!

On Thursday, at the beginning of the "soft opening," I stopped by the new facility and captured some photographs of the first activities there. I hope you enjoy seeing these early action photos of some of the staff and first visitors as much as I enjoyed photographing the wonderful folks there!

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Oak Ridge's new Senior Center seen at sunset



Jim Ridings signing in

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Laura Clark, UT Extension Exercise Class leader and Elaine Gunsallus starting first class in new room



Ken Mayes, Recreation Assistant, demonstrates the use of exercise equipment to Diane Pavelka, Elaine Gunsallus and Barbara Press