

Seniors 'spark in the park'



Cheryl Makin, @CherylMakin 12:27 a.m. EDT July 14, 2016

Residents from 11 Chelsea Assisted Living communities joined together for food, fun and festivities at Thompson Park



(Photo: Keith Muccilli/ Staff)

JAMESBURG – Family is family, whether it's the people you grew up with, or the people you are living with now.

For Dorothy Schwartz, this was certainly the case as she joined with more than 100 senior citizens from almost a dozen Chelsea Senior Living communities Wednesday for some old-fashioned summertime fun at Thompson Park.

"This is phenomenal," said Schwartz, who has lived at the Chelsea Senior Living at Forsgate complex in Monroe for just over a year. "It is wonderful that it is not just one individual Chelsea, but almost all of the

Chelseas in New Jersey are here. It's like getting together with family. We can mingle with the residents of the other Chelseas."

The residents from 11 of the 14 state Chelsea Senior Living locations gathered at a tree-covered picnic grove in a bucolic spot by the lake. About 10 to 12 residents came from the various communities in East Brunswick, Monroe, Warren, Bridgewater, Fanwood, Manalapan, Brick, Montville, Tinton Falls, Toms River and Marlboro, said Chris Slavicek, regional director of lifestyles and business development.

Residents of varying acuities participated, from the independent and ambulatory to those in walkers and wheelchairs to a few from the memory care communities.

This is the second year for the summer barbecue, Slavicek said. But, last year the event only included the East Brunswick and Monroe Chelsea communities. This year was "go big or go home," he said.

"This is part of our Summer Day Getaway series," said Slavicek, who also is the Mayor of Helmetta. "In June, July and August, the Chelseas get together and do summer activities. In June, we went to Point Pleasant for a day at the shore. We called that 'Beach Day Getaway.' Today we have 'A Spark in the Park' and in August, in honor of the Rio Olympics, we will host 'Never Too Old For The Gold' and residents will participate in abridged Olympic events and have an international buffet."

Slavicek said he designed the summertime event with intentions on keeping life vibrant for the aging population during the dog days of summer.

"'A Spark in the Park' nurtures the true spirit of summer," he said. "The event allows for a spark of reminiscence to their summer pastimes while they enjoy a great summer day getaway with their friends and residents from their assisted living neighborhoods. It gives a spark of life. It is important to reminisce and remember the past picnics and barbecues."



Residents from several Chelsea Senior Living locations in New Jersey attended a picnic at Thompson Park in Jamesburg on July 13, 2016. Lenny Lo Mauro, left, and Virginia Donner wait for lunch to be served. (Photo: Keith Muccilli/ Staff)

Ruby Campbell-Barnes of the Chelsea Senior Living at Bridgewater couldn't agree more.

"I think it is helpful to bring everybody out in an environment of nature," said Campbell-Barnes, who lived in the Forsgate community for about five years before moving to the Bridgewater in October. "It brings everyone closer together. We eat, we talk, we listen to music and we see friends that we haven't seen in a while."

Crossing LifeStyle Director at East Brunswick Gina Gentilini-Borzilleri said the events give residents the sense that the Chelsea family is "broader and bigger than the building you live in."

"A day like this gives them a taste of summer days," she said. "Get together, talk about old times and see friends you haven't seen in a while."

"They love it. I love it," said Regina Browne, lifestyle director at Chelsea at Forsgate. "Having all of us come together and intermingle with each other is fabulous."

Schwartz and her friend and fellow Chelsea at Forsgate resident Holly Pankiewicz are scheduled to go to everything the Chelsea is offering this summer. For Pankiewicz, not only do the events offer fun in the sense of an enjoyable activity, but they offer solace as well. Having lost her husband and suffered a stroke, Pankiewicz said she would feel alone if she just stayed in her rooms. The Chelsea commun

"Since I got here, I'm not feeling so alone," said Pankiewicz, who has lived at the Chelsea for two years. "Events like this have deeper meaning. They give me something to look forward to."



Residents from several Chelsea Senior Living locations in New Jersey attended a picnic at Thompson Park in Jamesburg on July 13, 2016. East Brunswick location lifestyle director Bonnie Schechter brings food to residents at the picnic. (Photo: Keith Muccilli/ Staff)

Along with the 100 residents, lifestyle directors and drivers from each community attended along with Food Service Directors Jason Shannon and Jeffrey Strubeck. Shannon manned the charcoal grill — at times doing spatula flip tricks — cooking dozens of hot dogs and hamburgers, while Strubeck doled out the fixins — baked beans, sausage and peppers, macaroni salad, potato salad, Jersey corn on the cob and sauerkraut. Watermelon and ice cream from an ice creams truck finished off the noontime meal.

"The food is delicious," Schwartz said. "And the day has been glorious."

Following the barbecue and right before the rain, the seniors enjoyed a "Music in the Park" concert by The Broadway Pops Big Band, which Schwartz called the "piece de resistance" of the day. A summertime staple at Middlesex County parks, the concert series is sponsored by the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders. According to Slavicek, the concert is the reason Thompson Park was chosen as the BBQ spot.

"These concerts are something special," said Slavicek, who oversees the lifestyle and business development for all 16 of the Chelsea communities, including three in New York and one in Pennsylvania.



Jason Shannon, food service director from the East Brunswick Chelsea Senior Living Residence gets hot dogs and hamburgers ready as residents from several Chelsea Senior Living locations in New Jersey attended a picnic at Thompson Park in Jamesburg on July 13, 2016. (Photo: Keith Muccilli/ Staff)

The Broadway Pops Big Band was a huge hit with the audience, as many sang along to the familiar strains of songs such as "On Broadway," "Puttin' On The Ritz," "I Don't Know How to Love Him," "America," "The Lady Is A Tramp," "Bali Hai," "Mac The Knife" and "Stars and Stripes" done in big band style.

"We love performing here," said bandleader Greg Giannascoli, who plays the marimba, timpani and percussion specialist. "The seniors here are always a great audience. Very appreciative."

Slavicek said that events such as the summertime series are credited to the "give back" nature of the owners of the Chelsea Senior Living communities.

"They wholeheartedly support events such as this," Slavicek said. "They are willing to give back and that speaks volumes about the culture of Chelsea Senior Living."

"All I have is praise," said Schwartz, who came to the Chelsea at Forsgate in a wheelchair and now uses a walker. "It's compliments to them."

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