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Westchester Playa Village employee and Westchester resident, Elvy Crane (right), helps WPV members in a game of bingo at a recent social event.

Westchester Playa Village celebrates milestone in providing services to area seniors

For Westchester Playa Village (WPV) Executive Director, Carol Kitabayashi, not a day goes by that she's not thinking about how to improve the lives of local area seniors. Kitabayashi joined the WPV team in 2012 and hasn't looked back since. This month, the nonprofit, a membership organization that helps

seniors age in place by providing them valuable services and support to remain independent, is celebrating a major milestone having just reached over 100 members and Kitabayashi couldn't be more proud of the impact WPV is having.

"WPV members continue to find purpose and meaning in their lives

knowing WPV enables them to keep doing the things they enjoy, be it weekly bridge, taking an exercise or painting class, going shopping or visiting grandchildren," said Kitabayashi. "WPV provides our members opportunities to learn, grow, give back to others and do things they never dreamt they'd do, like be in a

fashion show."

Most of the group's members are in their 70s, 80s and 90s, but still want to live active, engaged lives. The loss of spouses, friends and losing the ability to drive, however, can make this difficult. Kitabayashi explains that even though seniors may have good

WPV hits milestone (continued)

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relationships with their family members, work schedules, childcare obligations and a lack of time can leave them on their own for tasks that become increasingly more difficult as we get older like getting to appointments, household chores and navigating technology. That's where WPV comes in. Seniors pay a yearly fee to join and are then able to receive a wide variety of services provided by screened volunteers. While each member has different needs, Kitabayashi says the most popular service they provide is transportation to and from medical appointments, the grocery store and the hair salon.

For Bea Vasek, who has been a Westchester resident for 49 years, joining WPV two years ago has exceeded her expectations and has enabled her to continue living an independent life in her own home, even after her husband passed away two years ago.

"Westchester Playa Village meets all the needs that I want. They are amazing and like my second family," said Vasek. "I'm more independent now and can get out. I have made such wonderful friends and everyone is so generous and kind. I am happy with the entire program."

Vasek mostly uses her membership for transportation needs, but also makes ample use of WPV's social

activities. So far this year, the group has held 17 programs at the Westchester Senior Center, as well as held field trip, holiday celebrations and exercise classes. The nonprofit also collaborates with the Westchester Family YMCA, Airport Marina Counseling Service and EmpowerTech to host the monthly Silver Seminar Series, giving area seniors the opportunity to hear about a variety of topics including technology, health and financial issues. According to Kitabayashi, WPV's most well attended events are their spring and holiday dance, which are open to all area seniors. Their holiday dance with music, refreshments and prizes will take place on Thursday, December 10 at the Westchester Senior Center.

While members are flourishing thanks to the program, so are volunteers.

Westchester resident Jody Onoroto has volunteered with the organization for five years, and she is also an approved vendor that helps seniors downsize and organize their homes. She volunteers four to five hours a month, mostly driving seniors to their appointments, and she says volunteering has helped enrich her life. She encourages others to get involved.

"Volunteering has added so much to my already meaningful life. I guarantee you will love the commitment and it's so workable," said Onoroto. "You

will meet lovely seniors and great volunteers. I had a full life before WPV and it's even better now. WPV is constantly building community. I'm just tickled to be involved."

For Martha Horn, WPV provides a place to give back and feel like you're making a difference.

"I usually drive once or twice a week, and the village has provided me with many opportunities to indulge my talents and interests. I help organize our social events and enjoy baking and arranging floral centerpieces for them," said Horn. "Over the years I have altered curtains, purchased and hung draperies, hemmed clothing, baked hundreds of cookies, written articles for the paper, listened to fascinating, funny and heart breaking stories while driving, and laughed and cried with members. I have felt truly useful and very much appreciated."

The group's volunteer base is at an all-time high with 170 people, but Kitabayashi says they are always looking to add more. Volunteers range from retirees, business owners and college students who can volunteer as much or as little time as their schedule permits. Some carve out just twenty minutes a week to offer a senior a ride to church or a beauty appointment.

A recent membership survey conducted by the UC Berkeley Center for the Advanced Studies for Aging Services, had 60% of members

reporting their quality of life has improved since joining and 92% of members said they are very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their involvement in WPV.

Kitabayashi is not surprised by the results. She is confident that WPV and its services are positively impacting its members and volunteers alike. The organization is currently working on expanding its service area, something Kitabayashi says could not have been done without the leadership and support of the late Morrey Plotkin and Karen Dial of the Drollinger Charitable Foundation.

"WPV is a very special community of caring and giving people. You may not feel you need our help now, but why wait? We do so much more than provide rides for those who no longer drive," said Kitabayashi. "We have touching stories of friendships that have formed, and people who have stayed or reconnected because of the village. WPV is a cost effective, valuable resource that can supplement the help you may already receive from family and friends. Give us a call!"

For more information on WPV, please visit thewpv.org or call (310) 695-7030.

Those interested in volunteering can register online and are required to pass a background check, a DMV record review and an interview.