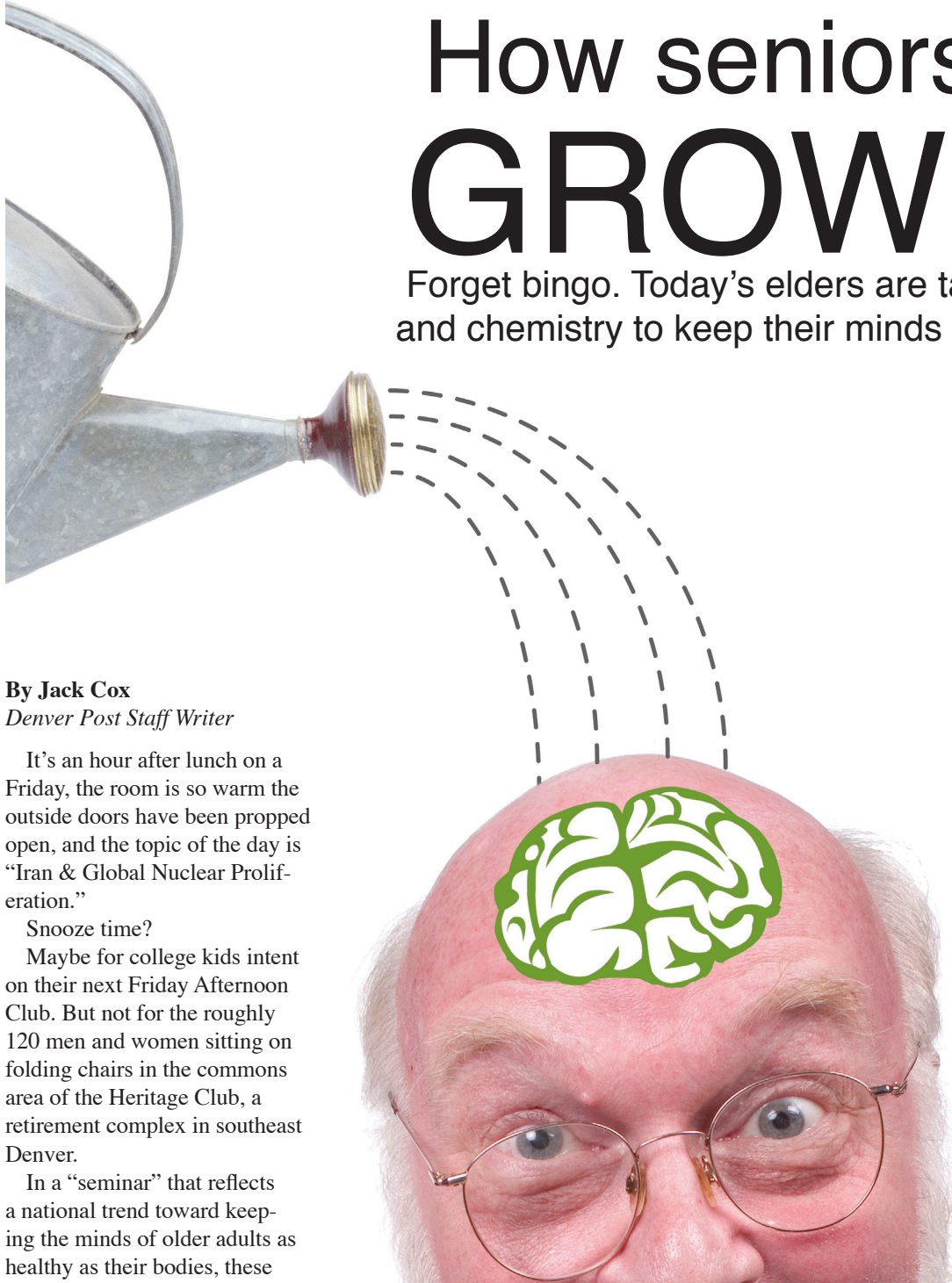


THE DENVER POST

DENVERPOST.COM | ©THE DENVER POST | *Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire* | 50 CENTS MAY VARY OUTSIDE METRO DENVER | ★★

How seniors keep GROWING

Forget bingo. Today's elders are tackling geopolitics and chemistry to keep their minds from going to seed



By Jack Cox
Denver Post Staff Writer

It's an hour after lunch on a Friday, the room is so warm the outside doors have been propped open, and the topic of the day is "Iran & Global Nuclear Proliferation."

Snooze time?

Maybe for college kids intent on their next Friday Afternoon Club. But not for the roughly 120 men and women sitting on folding chairs in the commons area of the Heritage Club, a retirement complex in southeast Denver.

In a "seminar" that reflects a national trend toward keeping the minds of older adults as healthy as their bodies, these folks most in their 80s have come to hear a lecture by a favorite: John Henderson, 38, a former schoolteacher.

"This is about current events, and you can't get much more

current than focusing on the issue of nuclear weapons and Iran," Henderson begins, launching into a tightly organized discussion that covers his

tory to geopolitics to the chemistry of uranium enrichment.

It's complicated stuff, but hardly anyone nods off. And when the hour-long talk is over,

Henderson receives a round of applause.

"All through college, I never had a professor that thorough," says Loretta Weiss, one of a dozen listeners who linger to ask questions. "He helps me understand what I read in the newspapers. It all makes more sense because of him."

"We feel more connected than we would just watching TV," adds her friend Elsie Shepherd, another Heritage resident.

Not just an amenity

Older Americans have dabbled in adult education for years, usually by auditing college classes or taking courses through lifelong learning institutes. But with research showing that those who keep their brains active may stave off Alzheimer's disease and other forms of cognitive decline, the senior services industry is starting to take schooling more seriously. Mental stimulation is seen as not just an amenity, but a key part of successful aging.

"It's enjoying a kind of boom," says Nancy Ceridwyn, director of special projects for the American Society on Aging, and a former director of senior

services for the city of Boulder.

“The big issue recently is, how can we involve more people who didn’t have educational opportunities in their early years? How can we make every community a learning one for older adults, so that we’re looking at brain exercise just like we look at physical exercise – as 30 minutes a day, three times a week, and it’ll be fun.”

At present, few homes for the elderly appear to provide much beyond what is sometimes called “brain aerobics.” Even the Heritage Club brings in Henderson only two or three times a month. But as well-educated baby boomers start moving into independent and assisted living communities over the next 10 to 15 years, academic instruction and other forms of intellectual engagement will become commonplace.

“I think this is the wave of the future,” says Kelly James, marketing director for Holly Creek, an upscale seniors complex that opened last year in Centennial. “People are demanding a lot more. It’s not just bingo and cards anymore. People want a variety of activities, and they want to be engaged in the community.”

At Holly Creek, where the average age is 78, the residents have their own computers, and offerings include art classes, concerts by the Arapahoe Philharmonic, travelogues on such destinations as Machu Picchu, and a book club where discussions of best sellers like “The Kite Runner” can “get pretty passionate,” James says.

The complex is exploring the possibility of teaming up with Arapahoe Community College for courses in history, art and other subjects that typically appeal to seniors.

“A lot like college”

Education and elder care are linked even more tightly in

some places. At Lasell Village, an independent living complex on the campus of a community college in Newton, Mass., the 210 residents are required to pursue 450 hours of study per year, under the supervision of a full-time dean. And at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, N.Y., according to ASA’s Ceridwyn, older adults who take classes “don’t just get the information and go home – they have access to all sorts of volunteer programs” to extend the learning process.

population, is they sit around and watch television 16 hours a day and eat bad food. There’s no richness, no reward, no sense of purpose – which is what gets you up in the morning,” Carpenter says.

The move toward more mental enrichment also has hit cyberspace. At SeniorNet, a California-based nonprofit that provides computer training at 240 locations around the country, executive director Kristin Fabos reports that many clients now want to learn not just the

is probably more critical to successful aging, says Michael Patterson, head of the national “Staying Sharp” program run by AARP.

“There’s more and more research indicating that the brain continues to develop throughout life, but it has to be stimulated,” Patterson says. “And if you’re actually with people, people are the most stimulating thing going.”

This may help explain the popularity of the lectures offered by Henderson, who is co-founder of Active Minds for Seniors, an enterprise that provides on-site education at 40 retirement homes and senior centers in the Denver area that will expand to Colorado Springs within the year.

Jeff Robertson, 40, Henderson’s partner and president of the 3-year-old firm, says nine teachers on staff have been specially trained to deal with the differing physical and cognitive abilities of mature audiences.

That means, among other things, nobody gets talked down to, and nobody gets embarrassed over leaving in the middle of a presentation, having trouble seeing or hearing, or mistaking Iran for Iraq.

“The academic model doesn’t work in a retirement community. Most seniors don’t want homework, they don’t want to be called on, and they don’t want to be taught at the level of detail found in college courses. What they want is the big picture,” Robertson says.

“Our intent is to engage the participants in a topic over time – something to connect with others in the hallway or over dinner.”

Sources: activemindsforseniors.com, 303-320-7652; asa.org; aarp.org; mtsfs.org; seniornet.org.

Staff writer Jack Cox can be reached at 303-820-1785 or jcox@denverpost.com.

Older and wiser?

The senior-services industry will need to accommodate a new generation of well-educated retirees looking to keep their minds active.

Today’s college graduates:

29.9%
AGES 25-44

29.6%
AGES 45-64

18.7%
AGE 65 AND OVER

Percentages include bachelors, masters, professional and doctoral degrees
Source: 2000 Census

“These types of programs produce profound effects in how people age,” says Tim Carpenter, executive director of More Than Shelter for Seniors, a nonprofit that provides life-enrichment services to 2,400 low-income seniors in 16 apartment buildings in Burbank, Calif.

“If you look at retirement through the right goggles, it looks a lot like college. You’re moving to another stage of life, with more freedom and a sense of opportunity.”

“But what you see more often, especially with the older

fundamentals, but the ins and outs of Google or PhotoShop.

“Our audience is the 50-plus population, and with the changing demographics, we’re seeing the needs and wants of our students changing,” Fabos says. “We have a free online book club and Latin course, plus discussion forums on over 600 topics, and we are looking toward offering more curriculum in more weighty topics, such as history or anthropology.”

But as worthwhile as Web-based education can be, learning through face-to-face contact