

Active Minds for Seniors

It's 6:55 at Heritage Club of Denver and the seats are almost full in the main gathering room, which can accommodate over 100 seniors. One of the regulars leans to her neighbor and asks, "Uzbekistan? Or do you think Taiwan? Medicare perhaps?" Similar guesses can be heard a few rows back. At precisely 7:00, the suspense ends: "Tonight, we are going to be covering the increasing tensions between China and Taiwan given the recent anti-secession legislation passed by the Chinese government." So begins another seminar by Active Minds for Seniors™.

Active Minds for Seniors™ is a three-year-old organization committed to bringing educational seminars to seniors. They offer seminars on current events, poetry, history, foreign affairs and more. Most of the programs are offered by retirement communities to their residents, although an increasing number are being offered in community centers and other locations that are open to the public.

It all began in 2002 when

former Cherry Creek school district teacher John Henderson began holding poetry classes in a Denver church basement. "It just so happened that everyone who came was a senior," says Henderson. "They were eager learners and very enthusiastic about tackling something new and mentally challenging." Based on this, Henderson approached several retirement communities about conducting regular seminars on-site and quickly was teaching several more courses.

In 2003, Henderson partnered with Denver entrepreneur and former teacher Jeff Robertson to help expand Active Minds™. "We realized that we needed to really focus on building our team and organization if we were going to be able to deliver on our mission of enhancing the lives of seniors through on-site educational seminars," Robertson commented. "We invest heavily in our teachers and our curriculum because it is the quality of our seminars that has made them a 'must have' for retirement communities throughout the area."

Active Minds for Seniors™ has developed an educational approach that emphasizes accessibility without talking down to their audience. "We understand sight and hearing issues and we adjust to that," comments Henderson, "but we also know we are teaching to an audience with a lifetime of experience and knowledge and we respect that wisdom. Our job is to bring something new that engages the mind, challenges the intellect and always leaves the participant better informed."

The importance of the programming that Active Minds™ provides is supported by recent scientific studies which show that engaging in mentally stimulating activities on a regular basis increases brain function and may stave off the onset of dementia. "Most of the communities we partner with already have weekly exercise classes for seniors. What we provide is calisthenics for the mind," comments Robertson.

"Active Minds™ is the single most popular program we offer," says Monica Hollenbeck, Activities Director at Heritage Club

of Denver. "Our residents look forward to each program and wind up discussing the topic for days afterward. It is part of the community here." Indeed, one can't talk to either Henderson or Robertson for very long before the topic of community comes up. "We want to bring positive change to seniors," says Henderson. "By helping to weave the fabric of the community, we feel we are living up to our mission." Robertson adds, "Active Minds™ seminars bring people together. And that connection lasts well beyond the hour."

Virginia Kraut, a resident at Park Place, says what she enjoys most is the opportunity to hear the whole story. "So much of the news is just about sound bytes. If Active Minds™ does a class on North Korean nuclear proliferation, I know I'm going to get all the historical background as well as the current situation. That really helps me understand what's going on in the world."

Other participants appreciate the objectivity that Active Minds™ brings to its presenta-

tions. "I've been trying for three years to figure out if our instructor is a Democrat or a Republican," says one resident. "I can't tell and it really doesn't matter. He does such a wonderful job of presenting all sides of an issue." Robertson laughs, "We joke that if we were political, we'd lose 47% of our audience. We come with no agenda other than to provide education. The seniors can decide for themselves how they want to vote."

"We're having a great time," smiles Henderson. "We love what we do and we hope it shows." Robertson adds, "It's the most rewarding work I've ever done."

If you would like to learn more about Active Minds for Seniors™, you can visit their web site at www.activemindsforseniors.com or call them at 303-320-7652.

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