

Keeping both body and mind limber

Vail Symposium offers educational seminars designed for senior citizens

Nic Corbett
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EAGLE — Keeping your body in shape may help ward off heart attacks and arthritis in old age, but it might not be enough to deter the onset of cognitive disorders like Alzheimer's.

A Denver-area resident participates in an Active Minds seminar. The class on Aug. 9 at the Golden Eagle Senior Center will be about teaching evolution in the classroom.



Minds: The Landmark Scopes

Wednesday at 4:30 p.m.
Golden Eagle Community
Center, Eagle

An in-depth program on the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" on teaching evolution in the classroom. We will discuss the history as well as contemporary perspectives on this issue, including the current debate surrounding "Intelligent Design." Instructor: Mike Scott. A lead-in to Dr. Gene Bammel on Aug. 14.

Showing the valley's senior citizens that the mind should be kept limber, too, the Vail Symposium and Eagle County's Health and Human Services are teaming up to offer a series of three free workshops this summer through a program called Active Minds.

"There's a lot of research showing active minds are healthy minds," said Fraidy Aber, the symposium's executive director.

Although the workshops are designed to intellectually stimulate older residents, anyone may come, Aber said.

"It really is a great benefit to the people involved," said Gene Bammel, an Active Minds participant who lives in West Vail in the summer.

"Part of the message of what used to be called 'adult education' is there are people who have time and energy to think about the most pressing issues of the day and something like Active Minds provides them with a stimulating environment in which to bat things back and forth," Bammel said.

Taking care of the mind

The Vail Symposium's purpose is to promote dynamic learning in the whole community, Aber said. Organizers realized this service was not specifically provided to senior citizens, a demographic that is growing in Eagle County, when one of its patrons suggested bringing the Denver-area Active Minds program to the valley.

"It really is an important part of just keeping your mind young," Aber said. "We're in a place where we take very good care of our active bodies ... but we're also providing the other side."



Jeff Robertson, a founder of the Active Minds program, stands in front of a roomful of senior citizens in an adult education center in the Denver area.

About 4,000 senior citizens reside in the county, but this segment of the population is projected to grow from 7.4 percent in 2005 to 10.6 percent in 2010, said Sheri Mintz, the adult services manager with Health and Human Services.

The seminars are expected to bring the area's senior citizens together, building a sense of community among them, said Jeff Robertson, who co-founded Active Minds in Denver in 2002.

“What we’re trying to do is make the experience last well beyond the hour and a half that the seminar lasts so that they’re in touch with this topic over time and in touch with each other,” he said.

Robertson's grandmother, who learned Spanish after retiring in her 60s, inspired him to start the program, but his partner, John Henderson, was spurred by the lack of resources at his parents' retirement community.

“Lifelong learning is really important and society does not do as good of a job as we would like,” Robertson said.

At retirement homes and communities, activity calendars pinned to message boards often show times for yoga and tai chi classes, arts and crafts and bingo, Robertson said.

“But rarely will you see real, lifelong opportunities for seniors and that's the thing that my partner and I were reacting to,” he said.

Henderson was a secondary education teacher who took time off when his daughters were born to become a stay-at-home dad. Looking to get back into the classroom part-time, he began teaching a poetry class.

“Most of the people that came to that were seniors, and he discovered he had a passion for teaching seniors and that seniors had a passion for learning,” Robertson said.

Now, the Denver-area program has grown to 50 classes a month.

An unbiased education

For now, organizers are bringing in the Denver program's instructors to teach the workshops in Eagle, which are on the second Wednesday of the month. Robertson said half the instructors have masters degrees or doctorates and all go through a three-month training process.

The Active Minds workshops are meant to be unbiased, Aber said. The instructors present multiple viewpoints on each topic and discuss its historical background.

For the world perspectives classes, Robertson said he and his partner usually pull topics from stories that are “below the fold” of the newspaper, which he said are “important and maybe not fully told.”

The three topics chosen for Eagle this summer — U.S. immigration policy, teaching evolution in the classroom, and nuclear power and global energy policy — all correspond to three programs the symposium offers outside the Active Minds series, which generally promote just one point of view.

“We’re hoping actually that people who participate come out to the Vail Symposium, so it ends up being six things that are tied together,” Aber said.

The Active Minds program in Eagle is in need of funding. Aber said the symposium applied for about \$5,000 in sponsorships and grants to cover costs.