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Forty years of Community Education

By Gretchen O'Donnell

WORTHINGTON— Forty years ago the concept of Community Education in the United States was just in its infancy. Minnesota was one of the first states to embrace the idea, and Worthington was one of the first towns within the state to explore the possibility.

This legacy is something of which Sharon Johnson, community education director in Worthington, is quite proud.

“In October of 1974, a group of local residents came to the school district to suggest starting a Community Education program and the school board approved it. This speaks well of our community that they were willing to invest in lifelong learning from the start.”

The program's offerings were simple to begin with, including enrichment classes with a domestic and creative arts theme as well as summer activities for children. The staff at that point was purely volunteer. A year later, the first paid staff member — an administrative assistant — was hired on a part-time basis. A year and a half later, a full-time director was hired.



Community Education Director Sharon Johnson (right) and former director Jerry Fiola (left) pose for a photo at West Learning Center. Jesse Trelstad/Daily Globe

The first major expansion of Community Education came in 1980, with the establishment of the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program.

Basic literacy classes were offered as were classes focused on the General Education Development (GED) Test. Four years later, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) classes were added, and three years after that a School Readiness (SR) program was included. In 1990 Youth Development activities were added in, rounding out the four “core” areas of the Community Education program.

Shifting demographics

Over the years the four core programs have expanded and shifted with the times, ultimately bringing six departments under the Community Education umbrella: ABE, Community Connectors, Early Childhood, Enrichment Programs, the Nobles County Integration Collaborative and the 21st Century Community Learning Center.

“One of the things I’m most proud of in Community Education is we have been able to grow and change with the community and the times,” said Johnson. “We have been able to meet the needs of our changing demographics.”

The ABE program, for example, has done an excellent job of continuing to meet its original aims while adding new programs required by the shifting demographics. To the original basic literacy classes, English classes and Civics classes were added to teach citizenship preparation for immigrants and refugees. The ABE program is now the largest program in Community Education, with 968 students enrolled for this school year.

“ABE and Childhood Education are really powerful as far as preparing children for school and parents for knowing how to help their children be successful,” explained Johnson. “We can help the parents learn English or get a diploma, and at the same time, we can help their children be prepared for school when their turn comes.”

“I give a huge amount of credit to Jerry Fiola,” continued Johnson, “for having the foresight to be proactive and creating these quality programs for our new residents.”

The changing needs of the community have not been dictated solely by the influx of immigrants and refugees. The Community Education program has been quick to meet other changing requirements of this day and age.

“A lot of our classes have to do with incorporating technology,” Johnson pointed out. “This has really changed since we began 40 years ago. Now many of our programs are computer and tech classes, which run the gamut from basic computer skills to digital technology such as Skype, Facetime, Facebook, Twitter, using tablets and phones, etc.”

The Social Media Breakfast Club, first begun here in Worthington last year, is a good example of how Community Education is working within the community to help expand local familiarity with technology.

“We are co-sponsoring the Social Media Breakfast Club with other local organizations,” said Johnson, “because we are always striving to make connections with other local agencies to figure out what the community’s needs are and how we can best meet those needs with local resources.”

Collaborating

“We love to partner with other local groups within Nobles County,” Johnson continued. “We can offer help with the logistics of a program and help sustain and structure the programs because we have that experience.”

One of Community Education’s recent local collaborations has been to join with the YMCA in creating quarterly catalogs. Rather than each organization printing its own catalog, the two groups have begun sharing one catalog, ensuring that their readers have twice the information available in one professional booklet. In addition, this has enabled each group to maximize its resources.

“Our catalog is printed through the Daily Globe,” Johnson explained. “And that’s another great example of a really good partner we’d had through the years.”

Johnson and the other Community Education coordinators are proud of the financial resources that they have been able to bring into the community over the years through grant money. Close to \$7 million in grants has been awarded to various Community Ed programs.

Jerry Fiola, director of Community Education for 28 years, from 1984-2012, was a huge part of the grant-writing success.

“A fair amount of our grants were in response to the changing demographics in the community,” said Fiola. “The district didn’t have resources within its programs, so we had to look elsewhere. We were always on the lookout for funding possibilities that targeted different programming needs, finding ones that targeted our needs. That gave us seed monies to start our programs.”

“The problem with grants,” Fiola continued, “is that they typically are not funded long-term. So we’d have a chance to see if the new program was effective for as long as the grant money lasted, then we’d have to see if we could fund it through the district.”

One program for which Fiola saw a need was a soccer program at the high school. The varsity soccer program was funded through a 21st Century Grant. When the grant money ran out after four years, the school district saw the value and was able to fund the program long-term through its own budget. Other Community Ed programs have been sustained through groups like the United Way and JBS.

All of these joined resources — and many, many more — are further examples of how the Community Education program strives to bring the whole community together through its varied programs and opportunities.

“Over the years, certainly, the different needs of the community changed, and we did our best to respond to those needs,” added Fiola. “The role of the Community Ed program is to adapt to those lifelong learning needs.”

Meeting the learning needs of all ages has been the goal of the Community Education program throughout its entire 40 year history.

“The old Community Ed slogan was, ‘Learning, Leading, Linking...that’s Community Education’,” said Johnson. “That was a great framework at that time. Our new slogan is ‘Engage, Enrich, Inspire.’ We want to engage all segments of the community and enrich their lives through education, to inspire them to use what they’ve learned in positive ways.”

The community is invited to help celebrate Community Education’s 40th anniversary at an open house from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m. Nov. 17. Short presentations from each department will be given, beginning with ECFE at 3:45; Enrichment Programs at 4:30; ABE at 5:15; and Community Connectors/Parent Liaisons/Nobles County Integration Collaborative at 6 p.m. The open house will be in the Community Education office area, located at 117 11th Ave.