



Seniors Teaching Seniors

"I come here very often," Lucinda G. Parra said during the daily lunch for senior citizens at the Chicanos por la Causa center in south Phoenix.

"The lessons make it easy to remember ways to be careful about different kinds of sickness." Over dessert, she was talking about the lessons given at the center twice a month by Pedro Vera, a senior aide with the Maricopa County Cooperative Extension Service.

Vera's talk that day had been about getting enough vitamins and minerals. Besides nutrition and health, lesson topics range from managing money to weatherizing mobile homes.

Vera leads the lessons at six senior nutrition-socialization centers in Phoenix, Tempe and Guadalupe. Five other aides teach such nutrition and consumer education lessons at 35 more centers in Maricopa County from Gilbert to Wickenburg. Last year, 14,382 people attended these centers, reports Dr. Ruth Brunton, the UA Extension home economist who organized and administers the senior aide program.

The aides are seniors, most of them recruited at one of the centers where they now teach. They get initial and weekly training from Brunton, other members of the UA Extension faculty and guest speakers.

Vera, a retired plumber, is glad he accepted the offer when the manager of the Escalante Senior Center in Tempe recommended him to Brunton. "I know that what we are doing is helpful for the senior citizens at these centers. . . They tell me so," he says. "Also, I have learned a lot to better myself and my health."

Josephine Garcia, sitting beside Parra at the Chicanos por la Causa lunchtable, offered an example of how the lessons have helped her: "My doctor gave me little envelopes of potassium to take. I did not

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Photograph: Lunching at Midtown YWCA senior center in Phoenix are Senior Aide Myrtle Kratzer (left) and Frances Horan, center director.

understand what they were for so I never took them. After Mr. Vera explained why we need potassium, I began to take them." Vera, across the table, added that bananas are a good source of potassium.

Garcia and Parra said that the lessons have influenced their choices of foods to use at home. They are not isolated cases. An evaluation of the aide program found that 22 to 34 percent more people followed several dietary guidelines after a lesson series than had before the series. The daily guidelines include eating breakfast; drinking at least six glasses of water; eating citrus fruit, another fruit and a green vegetable; getting two servings of protein, two cups of low-fat milk, and four servings of whole grain and fiber; and not adding salt or sugar to food.

The evaluation also showed increases in the number of people getting at least 20 minutes of exercise daily, not smoking, not drinking alcohol or coffee or not taking unprescribed drugs. Seven-tenths of the participants said they learned at least two new ways to save and stretch their consumer dollars.

Aide training is the core of the Maricopa County Cooperative Extension Service Senior Nutrition and Consumer Education Program, designed to help senior citizens maintain physical, mental and economic self-sufficiency. Brunton explains, "The program is based on the premise that people learn best from people like themselves whom they can trust to understand their problems, from good models and from frequent repetition and reinforcement over a long period of time."

The aides' part-time jobs include training and discussion sessions each week about teaching methods and program topics. Twenty consumer and professional members help plan and supervise the program.

The aides adapt the lessons to the needs and interests of the seniors where they teach. For example, Vera gives many of his classes in Spanish. At the Mesa Senior Day Care Center, aide Anne Hamilton taught wheelchair-bound elderly about food and drug interactions and about ways to handle telephone solicitations. Lettie Morris's lesson, "Myths of Aging," at the Okemah center in Phoenix sparked a lively discussion of lovemaking.

Other aides are Myrtle Kratzer and Marjorie Miller, who work in the inner city of Phoenix, and Bridgett Morrissey, who works in towns to the northwest. Kratzer, 71, hikes four miles a day, practicing what she preaches about healthful exercise.

The nutrition-socialization centers where the aides teach are open to all people ages 60 and up. In Maricopa County, that is 16 percent of the population. Most of the people who eat lunch at the centers pay the voluntary donation for the meal even though almost three-fourths of the diners have low incomes.

The Area Agency on Aging sponsors the meals at the centers. That agency is also one of several which have channeled federal grants into Brunton's program to pay aides' salaries and other expenses. The Governor's Council on Aging has recommended that the Senior Nutrition and Consumer Education Program be expanded to other Arizona counties besides Maricopa. Several former aides in the program have gone on to full-time jobs with other service agencies.

"The aides have become enthusiastic, informed educators in nutrition and consumer topics," says Brunton. "They benefit themselves from the meaningful employment while they help their fellow older adults find new ways to healthier, happier living."



Senior Aide Pedro Vera.