

Generational Outreach

When is a café more than a place to eat? When it serves a community of “booming” seniors who are ready to play.

by Susan Holaday

Mather's—More Than A Café, located in Evanston, Ill., is an unusual foodservice operation. Designed by Mather LifeWays, a local not-for-profit organization, to help older persons “age well,” it is a combination of restaurant, community center and educational facility that provides opportunities for older adults to live, work, learn, play and enjoy a freshly prepared meal.

The face of America is changing dramatically as the baby boomers—persons born between 1946 and 1964—move into their “senior” years. In 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, every hour 330 people turned 60. Today's seniors are better educated and in better health than their parents' generation. Life expectancy reached an all-time high in 2000 at a projected 77 years.

Executives at Mather LifeWays—itself a “boomer” at 60+ years of age—set out eight years ago to make sure those “golden” years would be spent more productively with greater fulfillment by redefining senior living as an opportunity for quality lifestyles, interesting choices and personal growth.

The operator of senior living resi-

dences, an Institute on Aging and a program called Community Initiatives developed a community service concept.

The perception of the ‘elderly’ is changing, Mather executives believe, as today's seniors discard past stereotypes to seek more fulfilling lives, filled with social interactions, physical and mental exercise and stimulating activities.

Designed to attract people of all ages within the community but geared particularly to those 55 and older, the cafés allow older persons to socialize, learn new skills and interact with one other, says Cara Baldwin, assis-



Betsie Sassen (left) says customers come to the café to connect with friends.



meets T.G.I. Friday's element to the food piece. Everything is cooked-to-order from scratch, and our chefs are encouraged to create their own specials and to interact with the customers.”

The cafés are attracting more than just seniors. Open to the community, they draw a varied mix from all age groups. “We get customers from local businesses too. They come and eat in or order take-out. It's

a senior rock and roll hangout without the music.”

Increasingly, businesses within the three neighborhoods in the Chicago area where the cafés are located have begun to use the cafés both for dining and take-out. Some of the cafés average 100 covers or more at lunch, Baldwin says. “We seat around 50 in the dining rooms.”

Senior dining, she adds, is a growth

market. “The aging adult world will double by 2035.”

Last year, the Café Plus locations in Chicago drew 10,000 people, enrolled them in more than 4,000 classes and sold in excess of 50,000 meals.

The award-winning concept is targeted to lower and middle-income older adults. “We try to break down stereotypes about older people,” says Betsie Sassen, executive director of café development. “We work very hard to create an experience—to make every day feel like a party. Our goal is to convert people from eaters to doers. Staying socially engaged and learning is very important, and the exercise component has a profound influence on our customers' well being.”

Many of the customers come to meet others or connect with old friends. “More than 60% are younger older adults—69 years or less—and they like the vibrant, upbeat modern atmosphere. Today, everybody is trying to figure out how to attract those younger

at a glance

Mather LifeWays, Evanston, Ill.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE SERVED: 27,970
COMMUNITY INITIATIVES:

- Mather Edgewater - connects older adults to resources and involves partnerships with several churches
- Info Plus - a free information service to help older adults and their families find neighborhood programs and services
- Mather's - More Than a Café (3 units)

SENIOR LIVING RESIDENCES:

- Independent Living - 2 facilities, Evanston & Wilmette, Ill.
- Memory Support & Skilled Nursing - 1 facility - Evanston
- Continuing Care Retirement - 2 facilities - Tucson, Ariz.

tant vice president of Dining Services. Programs, classes and day trips, as well as a network of community resources, are integral parts of Mather's—More Than A Café.

“We're trying to enhance the ways for seniors to age well,” she says. “They love it. You don't go to our cafés to play bingo. But you can learn yoga, how to use a computer or how to step dance. There's a Starbucks meets Panera

older adults.”

She views the concept as a type of corner café that is open to the entire community. Seniors enjoy the activities, the social interactions and the food, and are viewed and perceived as people first, Sassen points out, not as older or elderly.

Mather has won worldwide recognition for the program. “We’ve created workshops to let people replicate the concept,” Sassen notes. “The goal is to see it replicated and there are many in process.

We began a network of the people who’ve bought our ‘toolkit.’ In our program and class offerings, we steer away from the stereotypical and do innovative things. We offer Pilates, Tai Chi, piano lessons, digital photography and Spanish. We continue to expand what we offer. We’re looking for opportunities to let ‘younger elders’ contribute meaningfully in their communities as volunteers. We see a lot of interest in returning to work.”

The café serves as “the key to get them in the door to see our programs and services. Our staff is trained to help customers, to lift them so they can fly. It’s way more than a restaurant.”

It takes a special kind of employee, she adds, to work in this setting. Employees learn the customers’ names and favorites, and interact and joke with them. Mather regularly seeks feedback from its clientele to use in evaluating the concept.

The cafés’ menu includes 35-cent cups of coffee with free refills, breakfast all day and entrées priced at under \$10.

“Breakfast all day is a huge draw,” says Mary Jo Lutjen, who holds the title ‘Master of Culinary Delights.’ “Our cooks enjoy the opportunity to be creative. We try to incorporate the different ethnic flavors of each neighborhood.”

Food, she says, “has always brought people together. We stick to sandwiches, salads and burgers, all freshly made. Our hot meals special menu comes out every two weeks. It’s a dinner and might be roast turkey, jerk chicken or beef Stroganoff, and it includes soup, salad, a vegetable and rolls.”

Mather also does vegetarian meals, adds Lutjen. “We’re really stepping up to those requests.”

Each location features two daily specials, a menu board entrée and an entrée that fits into one of five categories: All American Grill, By Customer Demand, Pasta Day, Chicken Delight Day and Fishermen’s Wharf.

The number of covers varies from 45 to 110, she says, and the average check ranges from \$5.85 to \$6.50.

The open layout of the cafés and contemporary design create an inviting environment, Lutjen adds. “We have shadow box tables that contain antiques and collectibles. We’re

open to the whole neighborhood, not just seniors, and that creates a lot of inter-generational opportunities. It’s a nice mix. We’re not a ‘senior center.’”

Lutjen often ties the food into programs, such as a series of travelogues held in the cafés. “For the one on London, we’ll serve something very British, like a butterfly cake for dessert. We’ll do luaus and bring in Hawaiian dancers, or a ‘Very Elvis Christmas’ with a Southern-style menu or peanut butter and banana sandwiches, which Elvis loved.”

Other foodservice operators see value in More Than A Café. Mather has attracted more than 100 people from 31 cities in 18 states and two foreign companies to its Café Plus workshops. Attendees receive a “how-to” manual with templates designed to help them create their own café. They attend a working café, learn to identify market needs and measure customer satisfaction, participation and involvement, and discover ways to budget and train staff.

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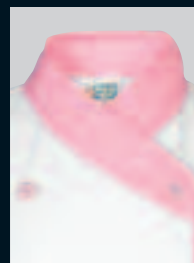


Breakfast served all day is a big café draw.

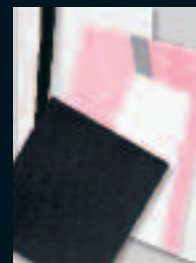
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