

WEST MICHIGAN SENIOR TIMES

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FREE

Fellowship Blooms at Ecumenical Center

Dave Hager, *Senior Times* Writer

People who think that Northside Kalamazoo's Ecumenical Senior Center is just a nice place to shoot the breeze or play Bingo have got another thing coming.

The Center at 707 N. Burdick Street is actually a treasure chest of programs for seniors who are looking for help coping with the realities of life. The opportunities are many, ranging from a food pantry to help with medical problems. Everything is served with a big dose of friendship.

"I tell them this is your house," said Dr. Denise Washington, executive director of the program which has been serving north side residents for more than 22 years. More than 150 residents 55 and older regularly use the center's services.

Dr. Washington said she strives to keep seniors from feeling that the Ecumenical Senior Center is a cold, clinical place with a sterile environment. "I just want them to feel comfortable," she said about the center's efforts to embrace the community. The result is that the center has become a place where fellowship blooms.

This feeling is a legacy begun in 1982 when Arthur and Edna Carlson moved to Kalamazoo from Chicago and noticed a need among elderly African-American residents for assistance dealing with the problems of aging. The Carlsons shared their concerns with the Community Outreach Committee of St. Augustine Cathedral which administered the first ecumenical program.

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Dr. Denise Washington
Executive Director

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Fellowship Blooms at Ecumenical Center

The couple put the current Ecumenical Senior Center in operation in 1992 with financial support. Other donations came from the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, the Dorothy U. Dalton Foundation and the Raskob Foundation. Money also came from St. Augustine's Cathedral, Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church and St. Thomas Moore Parish.

The goal of the program was to improve seniors' self-esteem with dignity and respect and to deliver services to make their lives better.

Dr. Washington, a Battle Creek resident, continued nurturing those goals when she joined the center staff in October 2013 after a long career as a community development specialist with the city of Battle Creek. She also holds masters degrees in accounting and business from Siena Heights University and a doctorate in business from the University of Phoenix. She also serves on the Siena Heights faculty, teaching classes in auditing.

Washington's business education and community work brought her close to the lives of senior citizens where she quickly saw the problems they faced as they aged. That compassion for seniors comes alive in the programs offered at the center and fuels her drive to find more.

For example, last March the center was designated a Food Commodity Site for Kalamazoo Loaves & Fishes, a nonprofit organization that gathers food to feed the hungry. That means that the Ecumenical Center is now a supply point for all needy people seeking food and extends its reach to the whole community as well as seniors. "All they have to do is meet the income requirements," Dr. Washington said, adding that "Loaves & Fishes has always been so wonderful to us."

The center continues to provide weekday lunch and breakfast items to seniors over 55. Dr. Washington hopes to enlarge the program so that food is also served on Saturdays.

"Another important part of the program is transportation," she said. The center provides seniors with free rides to doctor visits, hair appointments and to fill other needs.

Education is another facet of service for the Ecumenical Center. Seniors can take classes in art projects including quilting and knitting. Classes are offered in computer use, in-chair exercise and Bible study. Often medical checks and short classes on dealing with medical

problems are also on tap. For example, the Kalamazoo County Bar Association recently hosted a question-and-answer seminar to help seniors with special legal problems connected with aging.

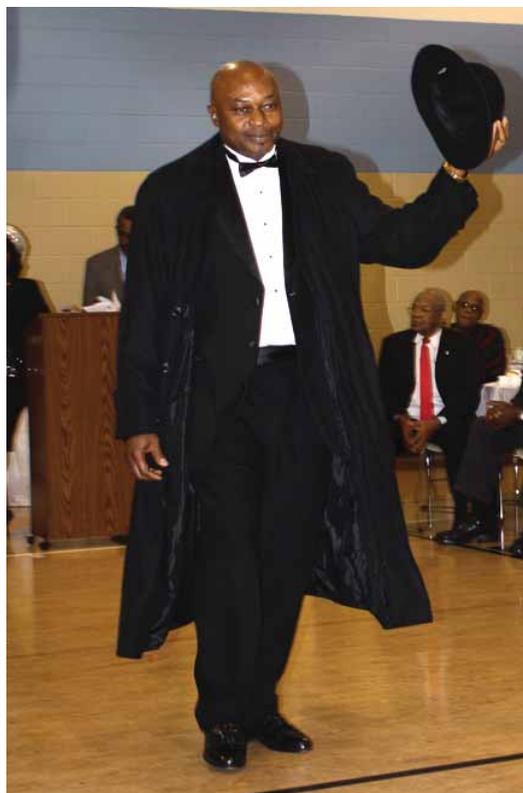
Special events include the annual fall fashion show and dinner which was held last month at the Radisson Hotel. It is the center's largest fund-raiser each year, although donations of cash and in-kind help are always accepted.

Other plans on Dr. Washington's improvement list include incorporating computer technology to make the center's operations more efficient; extending hours each day so that visitors can stay for supper rather than heading home after the regular 3:30 p.m. closing time; revamping the security system and painting the walls with bright colors.

"We want this to be a comfortable, safe environment," she said.

More information on the Ecumenical Center may be obtained by calling 269-381-9750 or online at www.ecumenicalsc.com. A calendar of events and information about donations is also available.

-Photos courtesy of Ecumenical Senior Center



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