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Video game craze hits senior center

By Sean Ruppert

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Since their creation, video games have mostly been seen as a preoccupation of teenage couch potatoes and kids looking to laze their days away, rather than go outside and be active.

The thought of using a video game system as an exercise tool for senior citizens might seem so counterintuitive that it might be worthy of Superman's Bizarro World, where up was down, left was right and black was white.

Yet the South Brunswick Senior Center, where all the other normal rules of reality still seem to apply, will soon be doing just that.

On May 15, the center will unveil a Nintendo Wii for use on its big-screen television. The system is one of five donated to senior centers in Middlesex County by the United Way of Central Jersey and will be the first put into use.

Other township senior centers receiving the systems are East Brunswick, Old Bridge, Monroe and Piscataway.

"When the seniors see the game, I think they will get it and I think they will like it," said Christine Wildemuth, director of the Office on Aging. "It is a great way for them to get exercise and have fun at the same time. Plus, it will help them relate to their grandkids."

Unlike normal video games systems where the player simply presses buttons on a controller, the Wii uses a wireless remote that simulates the motion of the person holding it. To play a bowling game, the user must swing their arms like he or she is rolling a ball down the lane. To play a boxing game, the user must throw punches in the air, and so on.

The center will provide the game Wii Sports, which features tennis, baseball, bowling, golf and boxing games that the seniors can choose from.

Ms. Wildemuth said that members of the senior center staff will stay near the Wii for the first three weeks, to help them learn to use it. As time goes on, the center will form competitions.

"Our goal is to form virtual leagues, where we can have tournaments and teams," Ms. Wildemuth said.

She said that the center might eventually organize trips to other towns to play against other senior centers.

The idea of donating the video game was hatched and organized by Jagdish Vasudev, the director of United Way of Central Jersey's New Americans program.

Mr. Vasudev said he came up with the idea after getting the system in his own home.

"I thought if this is good for me and my wife, it could be for seniors as well," he said. "It provides stretching exercise and movement. This is not just a donation to have fun, the purpose is for improving health."

Mr. Vasudev consulted with Dr. Nayan Kothari, chair of the Department of Medicine at St. Peter's University Hospital in New Brunswick, and said he was told it was a great idea.

Mr. Vasudev then met with Middlesex County Department on Aging Director Margaret Chester to develop a list of centers to receive donations. Mr. Vasudev said they picked the centers in Middlesex County that had the largest and most active senior population, as well as the most diverse.

He said that eventually he would like to expand the number of senior centers with access to the gaming system as time goes on.

"This is a pilot program. Our hope is to expand it to the whole of Middlesex County," Mr. Vasudev said.

The Wii will be available beginning at 11 a.m. on May 15. Mr. Vasudev, as well as Councilwoman Carol Barrett, will be on hand for the kickoff.

It will be open to any South Brunswick resident who is 55 or older. For more information, contact the Office on Aging at 732-329-9214 ext. 7670.

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