

The Shepherd's Center of Richmond Celebrates Its 40th Anniversary

By Suzanne P. Wiltshire

The Shepherd's Center of Richmond has reason to celebrate in 2024. This year marks the nonprofit's 40th anniversary of providing educational and transportation services to older adults in the Richmond metropolitan area. A special lunch in March will commemorate the occasion.

The Center had its beginnings in the early 1980's, when the Rev. Robert S. Seiler, a visionary Episcopal priest and former bomber pilot of B-24's in World War II, noted a lack of opportunities and services for the growing population of senior citizens in Richmond. He formed an advisory committee of local university administrators and business leaders to create a nonprofit organization to address these issues. Seeing a successful model in the Shepherd's Centers of America (SCA), founded in 1972 in Kansas City, Missouri, Seiler and his committee decided to establish a Shepherd's Center in Richmond, and they adopted the national organization's mission of providing intellectual stimulation for senior citizens, helping them stay as long as possible in their homes, and giving them opportunities for service. Seiler sought and received support from Stuart Circle churches in the Fan District of Richmond, notably St. James's Episcopal and Grace Covenant Presbyterian, and used their spaces for meetings, classes, and an office. He also received monetary support from individuals, corporations, congregations and foundations to fund a pilot program.

All of Seiler's efforts culminated in the chartering in 1984 of The Shepherd's Center of Richmond as a nonprofit, nondenominational organization to help older citizens remain active, independent, and engaged. Seiler became its first executive director. Julie Adams-Buchanan serves today as only the fifth director in the organization's history.

Forty years later, although many changes have occurred, that double mission of education and service remains strong, with work carried out by volunteers and a small staff consisting of the executive director and three part-time employees. Rich and varied learning opportunities are available through the Center's Open University, with courses taught by local college professors and professionals from around the community. Approximately 25 courses are offered three times a year in eight-week sessions, available at three locations on both sides of the James River. Today's territory has been widely expanded from that of 1984, when the Shepherd's Center was designated for seniors living west of First Street to the city limits and from Broad Street south to the James River.

Over the years, favorite course topics at the Open University have included those related to British and American history, current events, the Bill of Rights, science and the brain, world religions, great composers, short stories, Shakespeare, architecture, exercise programs, memoir writing, genealogy, travelogues, French, Spanish, and, a recent addition, instruction in media devices. The Shepherd's Center learned from the experience of COVID new ways of engaging students through the use of Zoom, and the organization continues to offer both in-person and

Zoom classes or a combination of the two. Tuition cost is nominal at a flat fee of \$50, which covers as many courses (at any location) that a participant wishes to take.

Further stimulation is offered through 60 lunch talks a year, given by community leaders, primarily on current issues and community resources. These lunch talks are available as a benefit of yearly membership (\$25). For years, a travel program introduced older citizens to the treasures of Richmond and points beyond. With the onset of COVID, group travel was no longer possible and social aspects of membership, so important to the vision of the organization, were lost or impaired. Currently, travel is being incorporated as part of a more encompassing events program, with the hope of recapturing a sense of belonging and fostering camaraderie among members.

In addition to its lifelong learning program, the Shepherd's Center also offers personal services to qualified older citizens, with the goal of helping them stay in their homes as long as possible. The transportation service to medical appointments or to the grocery store for those who are no longer able to drive was hit hard by COVID. These transportation services are provided at no charge by volunteer drivers, using their own cars and fuel. Since COVID, the Center has restored transportation to 53 clients, representing 738 trips. As the number of volunteer drivers increases, more zip code areas will be restored to the transportation program.

The Center also provides handyman service and friendly calls and visits to older adults. The calls were especially appreciated during the lockdown days of COVID. As always, during its 40 years, volunteers are the heart of The Shepherd's Center of Richmond, especially in the areas of communication with members and clients, governance, publicity, fundraising, transportation, recruitment of lecturers, and office assistance.

The Shepherd's Center operates with a modest budget, also affected by COVID, with 80% designated for programs and services. The organization has met 80% of its recent fundraising goal of \$40,000, and hopes that by the time of the anniversary lunch, the goal will have been met completely.

The spirit and vision of founder Robert Seiler are still alive today as The Shepherd's Center of Richmond carries out its 40-year mission of encouraging older adults to remain active and independent through enrichment programs and volunteer service to their peers. There is much to celebrate! At the gala lunch to be held on March 14, 2024, members will formally remember the organization's past, honor current volunteers, and salute those who have made significant contributions toward improving the lives of older citizens through the work of the organization.

For further information or to volunteer, go to tscor@tscor.org or call 804-355-7282.

Adding to the Celebration!

The Shepherd's Center moved its offices to a new location on January 4, 2024. The 40-year-old nonprofit that serves older citizens through lifelong learning programs and transportation to medical appointments, has taken up residence at 5101 Monument Avenue, across from the Willow Lawn shopping center.

"We hope our new site will give us more visibility in the community and facilitate our serving older citizens," says Julie Adams-Buchanan, executive director of the organization. In doing research on the new building, Adams-Buchanan learned that her grandfather, Dr. Theodore F. Adams, president of the Baptist World Alliance and pastor of Richmond's First Baptist Church, had made the dedicatory speech when the building first opened in 1962 as the Virginia Baptist Building. In more recent years it was owned by the Retail Merchants Association, now called InUnison.

The striking building was designed in International Style structure by Merrill C. Lee, FAIA. According to Mimi Sadler, architectural historian and board member of The Shepherd's Center, Virginia's Baptists wanted to express "Baptist stability, liberality, cooperation, leadership and dignity." She observes that the first thing you notice about the building is the lacy masonry-block screen that shades the interior spaces and provides the building's only ornament. "This unique feature prevents heat gain while still allowing diffuse natural light to fill the interior," she says. A freshly painted lobby with marble-clad walls and a terrazzo floor greets visitors as they enter the building. The Shepherd's Center's office suite on the first floor is light and airy with good areas for work and for storage. Outside in the parking lot are ample handicapped spaces for those who need them.

Adams-Buchanan is particularly pleased that the numerous volunteers on whom the Shepherd's Center relies will have access to the new offices for work, meetings and programs. "It is a fresh start for us as we celebrate our 40th anniversary in 2024," she says.