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A matter of balance: overcoming the fear of a fall

By *Sophie Braccini*

Lamorinda Village volunteers and members.
Photo Lily Dong Photography

Starting Jan. 12, Lamorinda Village is offering the senior community an innovative eight-week fall prevention program: "A Matter of Balance." What makes this program different is that it addresses the fear of falling and aims at changing the perceptions as well as the material elements and empowers seniors to live a safer and more active life.

Anne Ornelas, the executive director of the Village, first heard of the program through Meals on Wheels' fall prevention program. She says that she was interested to see an approach that would combine overcoming feelings of negative helplessness, the fear of falling, with material strategy and physical exercises. Lamorinda Village volunteer Cynthia Robey was trained in the program and will start the first Lamorinda session along with Skip Bradish, another volunteer.

Robey, a Lafayette resident and long-term Village volunteer, was convinced that an approach simply focusing on balance was not enough and that this

program fits the bill. She was trained by master trainer Alayne Balke, program manager at Senior Outreach Services, Contra Costa Meals on Wheels. Robey says that fall prevention has been an important concern for her; she believes that her father died as a result of a fall at age 92. She explains that she was enthused by the fact that the program uses a cognitive behavioral approach to retrain the brain. "If you think that you are going to fall, then it will happen," she says. Ornelas adds that the program is effective because it helps retrain the brain, helping seniors become more in control of their health and physical activity.

Balke, who became a trainers' trainer in Maine, says that "A Matter of Balance" is a nationally recognized program that has been evaluated for its efficacy at preventing falls. It was born from combined efforts of Maine's therapists in the '90s and taken over by that state's association for healthy aging in 2003. It includes a detailed eight-lesson plan that participants follow. She adds that the group training is restricted to 12 to 15 participants, because one of the important elements is the connection and support that form during the two-month program.

Fighting the fear of falling and taking charge of preventing fear is done through the sharing of stories and strategies in the home and around town, and also includes physical exercises. Robey notes that the physical activity presented is not just for the legs, but addresses the whole body.

The first session in Contra Costa County were led in Rossmoor and Pleasant Hill. The eight weeks starting in January will be the first in Lamorinda. Ornelas says that hundreds of trainings have been conducted all over the country and that 97 percent of participants reduced their fear of falling after the training and felt comfortable increasing their activity.

The program is offered to the entire community, not just Lamorinda Village members. Ornelas adds that the organization charges \$15 for the eight weeks to cover the cost of refreshments. Lafayette Orinda Presbyterian Church, 49 Knox Dr. in Lafayette has offered the location, and Meals on Wheels provides the manuals. The participants should be available for eight consecutive Fridays, from 10 to 12 a.m. starting on Jan. 12.

Lamorinda Village is a local nonprofit that actively builds a community that embraces connections, caring, and choices in how seniors live and thrive. Registration for the training can be done on the Village's website at lamorindavillage.org.

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