EATING AT THE EVERGREEN Seniors’ Community Centre Restaurant

The Evergreen Seniors’ Community Centre is a hub that provides services and activities for adults aged 55 and older living in the community of Guelph-Wellington. Together, the City of Guelph and the 2600 members of the Guelph-Wellington Seniors’ Association (GWSA) offer approximately 90 different activities and services, many of which are run by their 500 volunteers. The Centre has a dining facility, which is open from 9am-1pm from Monday to Friday and is managed by one full-time chef and operated by volunteers.

Introduction and Research Goals

This study explored how seniors experienced the restaurant at the Evergreen Seniors’ Community Centre. In particular, the Evergreen Centre was interested in understanding how the restaurant facilitates feelings of connection between older adults.

Researchers investigated:

• What draws older adults to the restaurant?
• What keeps older adults coming back to the restaurant?
• Does eating at the restaurant build feelings of connectedness among older adults?
• What are suggestions for improving the restaurant experience?

Background

This study was in response to the Evergreen Centre’s desire to learn more about the experience of social dining for older adults. It builds on a literature review which identified a gap in research around the psychosocial benefits of social dining (Stehouwer, 2014). While existing research highlighted the positive nutritional benefits of eating as a group in older adulthood (e.g. Keller et al., 2010), few studies examined how social dining might impact the well-being of older adults. Given that social support and supportive environments are key predictors of positive mental health outcomes among older adults (MacCourt, Wilson & Tourigny-Rivard, 2011), the researchers were interested in exploring how dining might facilitate social connectivity in the Guelph-Wellingtont context.

Methods

Researchers from The Research Shop conducted 55 surveys and 13 interviews with participants of the Evergreen Seniors’ Community Centre about their experiences at the restaurant. The survey collected general information including how often the participants ate at the restaurant, key reasons for eating at the restaurant and suggestions for improvement. The interviews were used to gain a more detailed exploration of stories from older adults who have eaten at the restaurant. The survey was open to all members of the Evergreen community, whether or not they ate at the restaurant. All participants who indicated an interest in taking part in an interview were contacted and interview times were booked on a first-come, first-served basis.

Limitations

In general, the interviews were much shorter than expected, as participants did not have many specific examples of times they had felt particularly connected over a meal at the restaurant. Participants also focused more on food quality than on the experience of eating at the restaurant. This could be a result of choosing a study group that is social and do not see dining as a primary time for social interaction. Also, participants could have chosen to enroll in the study in favour of improving the restaurant.

Research Findings:

Key findings from surveys include:

• Many participants (38%) ate at the restaurant on a weekly basis (Figure 1)
• 80% of participants ate meals at the restaurant at least some of the time
• Key reasons for eating at the restaurant included: affordability, convenience, enjoying the food, the welcoming atmosphere and eating with friends
• Service could be improved by extending hours, paying more attention to dietary concerns and more creative advertising for the menus (Table 1)

Key findings from interviews include:

• The restaurant provides a warm and friendly environment where older adults feel comfortable to build social networks
• The restaurant is convenient for older adults living near the Centre and for those living far away but who participate in activities at the Centre
• Participants positively described the quality of the food, especially for the value of their money
• Some participants felt the restaurant could do more to prevent cross-contamination (e.g. gluten-free diets), while others felt they catered to their dietary needs well
• Participants enjoy the restaurant as-is and only suggested small improvements such as extending the hours

Conclusions:

• Participants who use the Centre often eat at the restaurant before or after their activities
• The restaurant is a friendly and welcoming environment that for some may assist with building social connections
• Changes to the décor and improvements to the menu advertising could make the restaurant more inviting
• Improvements to the attention paid to dietary needs and extending the hours should be investigated
• Overall, participants were satisfied with the quality and quantity of the food. Though some marked the portion sizes were large, this could at times facilitate sharing between friends or saving leftover food for a second meal.
• Many participants directly and indirectly expressed that dining in a group setting helped them feel connected to friends

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