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Aging population plays starring role in story of Ninilchik's past, present

Editor's Note: This is the second in a three-part series that looks at the southern Kenai Peninsula's senior population — how it's growing, what role seniors play in their communities and how the communities are meeting seniors' needs.

By McKibben Jackinsky
Staff Writer

In the mid 1800s, the Russian American Fur Company was looking for a place where its pensioners could settle. Among other Alaska locations, an unpopulated little indentation along Cook Inlet's eastern shore was selected. Situated at the mouth of a river, it offered fresh water, fishing and clam digging, areas where gardens could be planted and coal along the beach for heating.

Today, the village of Ninilchik still exists, although it has spread beyond the mouth of Ninilchik River. Many descendants of those founding families still call the area home, although others have moved into the area. And, more than 150 years since those founding families landed on the beach, a growing number of residents are senior citizens.

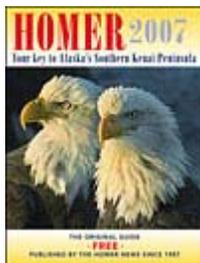
"When I started in 2001, we had about 80-90 members," said Julie Welch, director of the Ninilchik Senior Center. "The last time I looked, about a month ago, we had 167 members."

The 1990 U.S. Census reflects a Kenai Peninsula Borough population of 40,802, increasing to 49,691 by 2000. During the same time period, borough residents who were 65 or older numbered 1,987 in 1990, and 3,649 in 2000.

Ninilchik's total population in the 1990 census was 456. That number grew to 772 by 2000, an increase of 69.2 percent. Those 65 and older in Ninilchik jumped from 62 in 1990 to 113 in 2000, according to Jane Gabler, a KPB planner. That reflects a 78.8 percent increase.

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“Organized in 1981, the Ninilchik Senior Center provides services to approximately 550 seniors per year,” according to a report prepared by the Ninilchik Community Group, adding that soon after the center was established, several area residents took out second mortgages on their homes as a way to finance a permanent facility on land donated by the late Marion Hysten. It has since gone through some remodeling, with a dining room added in the mid-1990s.

“And we have been doing repairs — new flooring because the old floor was cracked, repairing a section that was rotted away,” Welch said.

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Those repairs help keep up with the building use. Lunches are served five days a week, with members paying \$5 a meal and nonmembers paying \$8.

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“The menus are certified by a licensed dietitian so that we provide one-third of the minimum daily nutritional requirement,” Welch said.

The center also offers a meals-on-wheels program, serving lunch to approximately a dozen individuals.

“And we have a decent variety of activities that are open to the whole community,” Welch said, listing quilting on Monday, scrap booking on Tuesday afternoon and men’s night on Tuesday, artists’ get-together on Wednesday and knitting and crocheting on Friday. That leaves the facility available for fund-raising activities on weekends.

In May, the center holds its annual endowment dinner and pie auction.

“The principal was donated by mostly local seniors since 1998, and the earnings are used to finance the senior center,” Welch said.

Deep Creek Charter Boat Association and other area fishing charters donate seats for a fishing charter raffle that begins in May. Tickets sell for \$10 each; drawings are held weekly with as many as 35 seats auctioned during the summer. Other activities include a quilt raffle, a United Way dinner and pie auction in the fall and a Memorial Day garage sale that nets between \$1,200-\$2,000.

Through an agreement with Ninilchik Traditional Council, the center has provided the land for a \$1.2 million six-unit senior housing complex just being completed by Ninilchik Traditional Council, with funding from Alaska Housing Finance Corporation and the Denali Commission. There are four two-bedroom units and two one-bedroom units. Rent is still to be determined, but anticipated to be between \$650-\$750 for a two-bedroom unit.

“All are handicap-accessible with age-in-place built into them,” said Bob Crosby of NTC. “As (tenants) get older and need a walker or wheelchair, the apartment is already set up to accommodate that. Doors are wide enough. Walls can accommodate handrails.”

There is a waiting list with 22 names on it, not all of them from Ninilchik.

“They’re from as far away as Anchorage and all the way down to Homer,” Crosby said.

Ninilchik Community Clinic is near the center and the housing complex. In addition to medical care, the clinic offers a community health fair and flu shots every year.

"We try to be sure all the seniors we work with get them," clinic director Pat Oskolkoff said of the flu shots.

Ninilchik Traditional Council has an elders program for individuals eligible for Indian Health Services.

"We have an elder lunch every Monday," said Anna Grant, the program's outreach coordinator. She estimated that 15 people participate in the lunch program. "At Easter and Christmas, we open it up to anyone and they can always bring a guest."

NTC's summer educational fishery gives elders an opportunity to stay involved in fishing. The council is recruiting for a volunteer driver to operate a van, which will help with transportation for elders. And Grant is trying to develop a box meal program for homebound elders.

Ninilchik School maintains a close relationship with the community's seniors. Most recently, fifth- and sixth-grade students in Jennifer Wardes class conducted life interviews at the senior center for essays the students are writing.

"They adopted a 'grandfriend' that is 50 or over, and (the interviews) started with birth, how they got their name, moved into childhood and where they grew up, adolescence, careers, adulthood, goals and aspirations, lifelong learning experiences and getting older," Wardes said.

The project offered cross-generation lessons in communication.

"One question was 'What did you do for fun when you were a teenager?' One answer was 'We'd go out in the boondocks and do necking.'" Wardes said. "My 12-year-old little girl had no idea what that was."

It also was a learning experience for Wardes.

"I was surprised because I don't get too much in that (senior) community and just listening to some of their ages and stories, growing old isn't that bad anymore," she said. "These people are so great. One guy was 68 years old and if I had to guess his age, I'd have said mid-50. People are looking so good now, taking care of themselves. It was a lot of fun."

According to a 2005 housing market study prepared by K. Slack Associates Inc. for NTC, the 65-and-over age group is not only fun; they are sitting in the Kenai Peninsula driver's seat.

"Over the next 10 years this age group will be a driving force in the primary market area with an increasing need for less home maintenance, accessibility options and great conveniences," the study reported.

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