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Alberta Matulis, left, Ann Lonergan and Leroy Grochoeki participating in a tai chi class last week at Mather's Cafe in the Chicago area.

Its Appeal Slipping, the Senior Center Steps Livelier

By JANE GROSS

CHICAGO — At a cheerful cafe and neighborhood gathering spot, eight women squeezed around a table, with bottomless cups of 35-cent coffee and plenty to do between the salads and paninis.

Mercy Prindes, 69, said she liked to “stop in just to see who’s there” when she was running errands. Charlene Ryan, 69, said it was the perfect “hen house, a place where we can sit and yack and yack and yack.” And Margaret Rogers, 82, raved about “real food” — appealing and under \$5 — to attract neighborhood young people, who live things up.

There is a new cafe society in Chicago’s Norwood Park neighborhood, one of three storefront hubs for the elderly here — a sleek meld of Starbucks, Bally’s and Elderhostel — that have become models for re-energizing America’s senior centers.

“Kids have their hang-outs,” said Marion Joyce Lindgren, at 67 the youngest in the group. “So why shouldn’t we, too?”

This is a time of ferment for the United States’ 15,000 senior centers, many vestiges of the 1960s and ’70s when federally financed meals for the elderly were a pillar of the Great Society. Under the Older Americans Act of 1965, centers are subsidized according to how many hot midday meals they serve. Nutrition and companionship remain worthy goals for them but are no longer the draw they once were.

A handful of studies show that those younger than 65 say they are too busy to use senior centers. But the main reason for staying away is the stigma associated with aging. In New York City, with a network of 329 centers, almost half are underused, according to Deputy Mayor Linda I. Gibbs. A plan by the administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to make the city more user-friendly to the elderly includes modernizing the nation’s largest system of senior centers, and including cafes, according to the mayor’s office and the Department for the Aging.

The 40-year-old model is not “serving the seniors of today or

attracting the seniors of tomorrow,” Ms. Gibbs said.

Tomorrow is a far bigger worry. Experts predict that baby boomers will not walk in the door of outdated centers, which are often in church basements, reminiscent of high school cafeterias before the advent of food courts, with few activities besides bingo and transportation to the mall.

“If they don’t innovate,” said John A. Krout, director of the gerontology institute at Ithaca College, “they will die.”

Fierce competition for the older-American market has inspired a search for new models and an emerging consensus about the elements the senior center of the 21st century should include.

Among them are fitness activities, chronic-disease management, fall prevention and other aspects of healthy aging; continuing education both practical and intellectual; volunteer and work opportunities for those not ready for retirement; a handsome environment that accommodates the physical limits of age without looking institutional; and some programs aimed to the “young old,” those from 55 to 65, to begin changing their negative view of senior centers.

Here in the Chicago area, these “best practices” are on view at the cafes operated by a not-for-profit social service agency, Mather Lifeways, in dense working-class neighborhoods like Norwood Park, and by the North Shore Senior Center, which serves 32 suburbs from Evanston to Highland Park from a 40,000-square-foot building. The center includes a fitness center, sculpture studio, classrooms and a sunny atrium.

At North Shore, where members pay \$60 a year, these goals are met under one roof, which Sandi Johnson, the center’s director, says may be too expensive for many communities. With 4,000 members and 700 volunteers, North Shore gets \$1 million a year from donors and raised \$15 million more in a capital campaign for the new building.

One way North Shore cultivates relationships with the young-old is by helping them



An exercise class in the North Shore Senior Center.



Arnold Feinberg and Richard Weiner in an art class.

care for elderly parents, with a daughters support group and geriatric case managers. Another attraction is the fitness center — members pay \$350 extra — where fliers advertise boomer-friendly “brain fitness” classes for the worried well and a conference on female spirituality. (Many boomers say they prefer working out far from the Spandex-clad twentysomethings at gyms like Bally’s.)

The Mather cafes strain less to bring younger people into the mix. There is nothing in the name, décor or menu that shouts “senior center,” and the cafes are in neighborhoods short on stylish, well-priced breakfast and lunch spots. So, as at Starbucks,

people of all ages mix over a steaming mug of French roast or a chicken Caesar salad. Cafes boast open kitchens, not just for the entertainment value of watching chefs at work but so new customers or those who come alone are greeted by a friendly face.

The gentle yoga classes, Spanish lessons and the like are reserved for older adults. The main room — with its bright colors, floating ceiling panels and Swedish modern light fixtures — remains a “neighborhood place, not a senior place,” said Betsie Sassen, Mather’s executive director of cafe development.

Cathie McCormick, 72, leads an exercise class for those with ar-

thritis. The gym equipment is regulated without having to move weights. There is no television set in the gym, or elsewhere, because old people watch enough TV at home and would rather talk to the person on the adjoining machine.

Mather says it will not franchise but it is training other organizations to start their own cafes with workshops and how-to manuals. Valparaiso, Ind., and Sun City, Ariz., already have cafes and more than 100 social service providers from 30 cities have attended \$975 start-up workshops, Ms. Sassen said.

Cafe regulars here in Chicago cite the lively ambience and menu choices as the main reasons they switched their allegiance from a local senior center. On a recent weekday, a few women were toweling off after exercise class. Some had signed up for a body fat screening. At computers scattered throughout the room, they shopped online and caught up on e-mail correspondence with grandchildren. From early morning until late afternoon, the conversation drifted from utility bills to Barbara Taylor Bradford’s latest romance novel, to cellphones they liked best.

Corrine Compton, 68, comes daily to a Mather Cafe in the Chatham neighborhood on the South Side for lunch and a workout.

Until recently, Ms. Compton forced herself out of the house and away from the drone of “Court TV” by going to another senior center where the crowd was a bit old for her taste, but the bridge games were serious and the line-dancing fun. What she hated, she said, was the lock-step lunch before the clock struck noon.

So when the Mather cafe opened here, “I checked it out with my girlfriends and we liked the youngish atmosphere,” Ms. Compton said, enjoying soup and a salad in the fading light of a winter afternoon. “When you walk in, everybody says hi. They may not remember your name, but they remember your face.”