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Happy Trails

Healthy Hikes
series helps keep
seniors physically,
mentally fit

page 10

Heidi McFarland, Santa Clara County Parks interpretive program coordinator, is seen leading a hike through Stevens Creek County Park. Bay Area Older Adults, Santa Clara County Parks, and Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District have partnered to offer hikes for adults age 50+ as part of BAO's preventative health program.

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Hikers enjoy a picnic lunch with a panoramic view of Silicon Valley during a break in a walk through Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve. Lunch gives hikers an opportunity to socialize during the Healthy Hikes program.

Social Climbers

Camaraderie a big part of Bay Area Older Adults' Healthy Hikes program

By ANNE GELHAUS

Bay Area Older Adults, Santa Clara County Parks and Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District are encouraging South Bay seniors to take a hike.

Sunnyvale-based BAO, in part-

nership with County Parks and the open space district, kicked off its Healthy Hikes program for adults age 50 and up on Jan. 21 with a trek that promised the best views of Silicon Valley. The moderate 3-mile hike through San

Jose's Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve drew 40 hikers.

"We usually try to keep it to 25 or 30 at the most, depending on the trail," says BAO founder Anne Ferguson. "That's why we doubled the number of hikes [in

the program] this year—to accommodate new people."

Ferguson started the program in 2013 with "a handful of hikes." That number grew to 11 in 2014 and 19 this year at both county parks and open space preserves. All hikes

take place on Wednesdays and are two to four miles long.

Next up is a moderate 4-miler around San Jose's Almaden Quicksilver County Park on Feb.

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Hikes

Continued from page 10

25. A guide will lead hikers to the rotary furnace that produced more than a million flasks of mercury in the mid-1800s, and to the ruins of English Camp, where miners were housed, for a picnic lunch courtesy of Togo's.

While hikers will explore several of San Jose's public lands, the program takes older adults on trails from Alviso to Gilroy. Hikes include a 3-mile guided tour of Coyote Ridge in Fremont Older Open Space Preserve above Cooper Garrod Vineyards in Saratoga, where the trek will end with lunch and wine-tasting on March 18.

Wine is also part of the program on June 10, when hikers can take a stroll through the Picchetti Ranch Open Space Preserve in Cupertino. The journey ends with a picnic at the eponymous winery.

Two birdwatching expeditions are planned for Vasona Lake County Park in Los Gatos, on April 15 and May 13. Since spring is a good time to catch glimpses of animal life in general, an easy 3-mile hike in Los Altos down Rancho San Antonio's lower meadow trail on May 20 will end at Deer Hollow Farm, where newborn piglets, goats and sheep should be on view.

In addition to open spaces, Saratoga is home to a couple of county parks with vastly different environments. Hikers can explore Villa Montalvo and learn its history on two mid-summer hikes on July 8 and 22. The following month, intrepid trekkers can follow the trail in Sanborn County Park along the side of cliffs produced by the San Andreas Fault. This hike is also offered twice, on Aug. 12 and 26.

Healthy Habits

Inspired by her grandpar-



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANNE FERGUSON

Bay Area Older Adults, Santa Clara County Parks and Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District have partnered to offer hikes for adults age 50-plus as part of BAO's preventative health program.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANNE FERGUSON

Hikers are seen here just beyond the Cathedral Staircase on the Mummy Mountain Loop of Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear Ranch County Park in Gilroy.

ents' love of the outdoors and learning, Ferguson—a former Silicon Valley biotech executive—founded BAO to empower older adults to improve their physical and mental health and social well-being.

"As we age and especially after retirement, it is critical to be physically active, develop new friendships and keep our minds stimulated," says Ferguson, who goes on every hike in the program.

Ferguson points out that adults ages 50 and older constitute more than 30 percent of the county's population and increasingly suffer from chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and depression.

According to WebMD magazine, the myriad health benefits of hiking include building leg and core strength and bone density, controlling weight, lowering the risk of heart disease, improving blood pressure and blood sugar levels and combating stress and anxiety.

Hiking with a peer group can also be good for seniors' emo-

tional health.

"Being with other people my age is inspiring," says one hiker. "We may be older, but we are challenging ourselves to do more and push on."

Ferguson says building new social relationships "is overwhelmingly the most important aspect of the hikes to the seniors who participate."

"Because people can go at their own pace, they have time to chat as they walk," she adds. "The picnic lunches are an integral part of our hikes as it is a time for people to socialize."

Every hike also has an educational component, and Ferguson says BAO hikers greatly appreciate input from hike leader Heidi McFarland, the interpretive program coordinator for county parks.

"She knows all the [parks] history and can learn things really quickly," Ferguson adds, such as how the ongoing drought is affecting waterfalls at Sanborn and at Uvas Canyon County Park in Morgan Hill.

McFarland's says she sees

the Healthy Hikes program as a way to encourage the area's senior population to visit county parks.

"Partnering with Bay Area Older Adults has enabled us to increase the number of older adults on county park trails and gives them the confidence to return to the parks on their own," McFarland adds. "Since 2013, we've had more than 800 adults ages 50 to 85 on our hikes."

Besides the health and social benefits, one obvious positive aspect of hiking is getting to explore the great outdoors. While the South Bay's parks and open spaces offer a wide range of environments and terrains, Ferguson says it can be easy to forget to get out and enjoy them when toiling away in Silicon Valley.

"There's a park in every city," she says. "This [program] gives seniors a chance to experience the diverse nature and history of Santa Clara County Parks."

For more information on the Healthy Hikes program, visit bayareaolderadults.org/2015-bao-hikes.