

Classes for activists: Seniors le

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What Renteria didn't say was that her fall a year ago near her home on an uneven Cumberland Street sidewalk near Mission Dolores Park bothers her to this day. Her right shin is still badly discolored from the injury and pain continues to wake her at night. But those descriptive details will surface with practice.

Twenty-five percent of the Tenderloin's 29,155 population is age 55 or older, according to an Urban Solutions 2004 neighborhood report using 2000 census figures. The TL's four census tracts show that people 65 and older, who number 3,690, are 12.6% of the population. The majority live in the eastern part of the neighborhood, which has the highest density of SROs. But Senior Action Network liberally defines a senior as 50 or over and invites disabled folks of any age to Senior University.

The seniors are issued a fat binder explaining the subjects to be covered, questions that will be posed, plus answers, and brief bios and contact lists of local, state and federal elected officials. Class materials have been evolving since 1994 when the university started here at Dorothy Day. Now the courses are offered four times a year in

alive.

The ethnic mix of seniors was extraordinary: Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, Russians, Italians, Japanese, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorans as well as U.S.-born from other states. Most live in the Tenderloin, South of Market, the Mission and the Sunset.

Ages ranged from late 40s to early 90s (a 92-year-old Bayview-Hunters Point woman was volunteering in the kitchen). Women outnumbered men 7 to 1. A half dozen had wheelchairs or walkers.

"Think inside yourself," David Grant, SAN's executive director, challenged them at the outset. "There is this power within you to tell people what you are thinking. Use that power. Make yourselves heard and make things happen. Otherwise, the bus goes right by and doesn't stop.

"We're all different," Grant continued. "but we all share our common agenda. It will seem scary to some of you — standing in front of the group (to give a speech). But the purpose is to send you out the door and down the street to City Hall, so you can speak in public about your concerns."

To begin, everyone in the room told their name, where they came from and how long they had been in

the city. Some struggled with English.

Others — especially the oldest — spoke too faintly to be heard.

The physically disabled sat at the far end of the table and after introductions became the most vocal participants. An exception was a nondisabled Italian man, Angelo, who piped up on just about everything. Maybe 1 in 5 spoke without prodding. Most were unused to speaking publicly and some had cultural barriers.

Asked why he hadn't spoken, one elderly Chinese man explained to this reporter that his voice quavered badly when he tried to speak to groups. "And where I come from," he added, "if you said the wrong thing you got your head lopped off."

In one exercise, the seniors identified major areas of concern such as affordable housing and transportation. But it was pedestrian safety that got the most attention. Braving potholes and jagged pavement and dodging "bicycle Nazis and skateboarders," said one South of Market senior, makes going from "point A to point B" dangerous.

"I won't run errands because it's like a video game to avoid things out there," said Jacquie Bryson, who lives at Folsom and Dore streets and said she is a Mills College graduate who studied counseling at Stanford University. Her response to the moderator's plea for ideas for solutions: "lawsuits!"

Formerly homeless, Bryson has problems with her legs and uses a walker or cane. At the District 6 Town Meeting in October 2005, she challenged Mohammed Nuru of the Department of Public Works to address the "terrible" condition of streets and sidewalks in western SoMa. A few days later, with the aid of her walker, she said she escorted him on a tour between Ninth and 11th streets from Howard to Folsom. She said he took notes and pictures.

But nothing happened. Months later his office called her. "They asked me for addresses and I said Mohammed had them," Bryson told The Extra at the break. Now, with no improvements, she is so frustrated she wants to sue the city.

Yoko Takahashi, sitting next to her, had a reminder of the city's pothole perils. She rolled up her left sleeve to show ugly scarring around the elbow. A year ago, she was on her way to Rainbow Grocery and fell at the corner of 13th and Folsom. "Uneven pavement" caused it, she said, "and chunks missing." She remembers cars honking for her to get up and out of the street.

A week later, Session II addressed Lobbying, and attendance held firm at Dorothy Day. SAN, drawing from its membership of 3,000 and its Senior University graduates, has been a familiar presence at City Hall and in Sacramento. Last year it took a group to protest the Medicare Part D prescription drug plan and held rallies outside the San Francisco offices of U.S. Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein.

"I became more aware of what I could do," Jack Harmon said months after the rallies. A 2005 Sr. U. graduate, he lives in the 400 block of Turk Street. "And I learned to say it in a few words."

The truth about lobbying, Shirley Bierly was saying to the group, is that when you and your support team have got your message down pat — and the bureaucrat or elected official you see consents to champion your cause — you still can't take it to the bank.

Bierly, a veteran of decades of lobbying, learned from her pioneering activist mother and is the unofficial dean of Senior University and knows the cruel reality. "They'll say yes to your face and make you a promise," she said, "and then when the vote comes, they'll vote no. It happens."

To keep promises on track: "Get it in writing."

Bierly was the warmup speaker for Lobbying with the remaining sessions to focus on Leadership, Diversity and Public Speaking. This was Day 1. Before they graduate during Session 4, the seniors are to stand in front of the group and deliver three-minute speeches.

Bierly is quick with words but short on volume. She started speaking at one end of the room, inched forward and ended up talking to a third of the room where the vocal participants sit. Behind her, with no chance of hearing, were five quiet Vietnamese ladies and a dozen others.

"I'm deaf and can't hear," Minnie Fry, a grandmotherly woman resembling the image of candymaker Mary See, said loudly to her neighbor. The man on her other side said, "She needs a loudspeaker."

Bierly continued to seek definitions of lobbying.

"It's the ability to connect with the movers and shakers," said Ed Evans from his wheelchair. The question "How do you do it?" got a variety of answers, including personal appearances with politicians, phone calls, e-mails, even political contributions.

"Having a group is the best way to go to make an impression," Bierly said.

Someone suggested a tape recorder could work better for documenting a politician's commitment than a signed paper.

"No way," said Bierly. "They wouldn't let you past the front door with it."

The height of the lobbying session was the mock confrontation through role-playing. And to set that up, Le, the gregarious director of Senior University, introduced melodramatically like a tuxedoed announcer bringing out a heavyweight contender, Tommi Aviccolli Mecca, a housing rights



Pretend Mayor Jacquie Bryson (left) and Ava Handy Beckham loved the role playing.

neighborhoods with high senior and disabled populations.

Seniors who pick up the gauntlet become community activists. Some at the session already have experience under their belts. But whatever it is about the program — the focus on their empowerment, the coziness of a peer group, the gregarious, charismatic director and organizer Anh Le, or just the free lunch — the seniors keep coming back. A third are repeaters; a few are taking the course for the third or fourth time.

In Dorothy Day's tidy, main floor dining room, tables were arranged in a horseshoe with chairs around them, the open end reserved for the speakers. The seniors' anticipation was palpable as they paused at 9:30 a.m. at a hospitality table with coffee, juice and cookies before finding a seat.

The event focused on seniors and their needs. It championed their causes and celebrated their voices. The goal was to learn how to get stronger, personally and collectively. Le greeted everyone enthusiastically as they arrived. Outside, the sun peeked through cloud cover and the weather was pleasantly cool. It was a good day to be