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Making Friends While Playing Mah Jongg

By Cathy Tyson



From left, new friends Sharon Galliani, Jewel Strom, Astrid Gehrke and Martina Alexandre. Photo Cathy Tyson

Players took turns chiming in. "Two crak," "three bam," "five crak," eventually coming around to perky and competitive 95-year-old Jewel Strom: "Six dot. What do you think of that?"

Dots, dragons, east, west - for the uninitiated it's hard to decipher the lingo but these dedicated players knew the difference between a pong and a kong. The game, which originated in China many years ago, takes skill, strategy and calculation but it provides an afternoon of socialization, new friendships and fun.

Moraga resident Strom learned to play Mah Jongg years ago with her mother and sister when she was a little girl growing up in San Francisco. She explains that it's kind of like a rummy game with tiles. She used to host a three-some at her place, but when one of the ladies had to drop out, they were in a bit of a pickle. Her daughter was concerned and contacted Lafayette Senior Services - they offered drop-in American Mah Jongg to experienced players on Tuesdays at the Lafayette Community Center from 1 to 3:30 p.m. with no reservations needed for the casual group.

Gentle, good humored camaraderie was in the air on a recent Tuesday, as the women played and casually chatted about families, upcoming holidays, shared bite sized

chocolates and more. "I can't tell you how wonderful they've been to me," said Strom of her fellow players, one of whom is her regular car pool driver.

While the game sounds rather complicated, longtime player and teacher Alice Stern says after a complete explanation, and a little practice, a light bulb goes off and all of a sudden players "get it."

Usually four people gather around a card table and use the 144 tiles that are divided into three different suits - bamboo (bam), characters (crak), and circles (dot) - along with honor and bonus tiles: winds, dragons, flowers and seasons. The game became popular in the states in the 1920s and by the 1930s the rules had morphed, becoming substantially different, some say easier, than the original Chinese version.

The sound of the tiles clicking on the table brings back fond memories for many of days gone by when mothers, aunts and sisters played together, recalls Maureen Neumann, director of senior services.

Win or lose, this low key pleasant afternoon is good exercise for the mind and an easy way to socialize. Those wanting to learn the game should keep an eye out for the next Lafayette Parks and Recreation directory; Stern will be offering American Mah Jongg classes in January and May of 2014. For players ready to rumble, they are always welcome at the on-going drop-in games on Tuesdays in the Cedar Room of the Community Center, 500 St. Mary's Road, Lafayette. Cost is \$1 for members, \$3 for non members. For more information, call Senior Services at (925) 284-5050.

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