

Poker Sessions Help Curtail Memory Loss

■ Local Expert Holds Class for Seniors With Onset of Alzheimer's

BY TIM POSADA

Local resident, author and poker enthusiast George Epstein has been teaching poker to large groups for years, but he recently found that his favorite hobby could potentially help people cope with memory loss. Epstein taught poker lessons to people with memory loss disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease, in a special session Wednesday at the Olympia Medical Center.

"When I began playing poker I found that I was remembering things more," Epstein said. "Mentally challenging activities are stimulating. They make your mind stronger."

Epstein, 81, retired from a prominent engineering career in 1991, and since then has spent time applying his former job to playing card games. Along with his love for cards, he is also interested in understanding the aging process. More



photo by Tim Posada

Detroit Street resident George Epstein has written books on playing poker, and believes the game can sharpen mental skills.

than one year ago, Epstein attended a class on memory loss and met Yael Wyte, a Leeza Care Advocate, after she gave a five-minute presentation on Leeza's Place, an organization started by television personality Leeza Gibbons that is

dedicated to providing aid for caregivers and people diagnosed with memory loss diseases. Epstein had been successful with teaching senior citizens to play poker, noting several examples of memory

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improvement, and hoped to see if he could help those with Alzheimer's disease as well.

"It's a great idea and does keep the mind active," Wyte said. "There's are many studies on memory loss that say that the more you keep your mind active the more you will delay the progression of the disease. It is harder for some people than others, depending on where you are within the diagnoses of the disease. It's completely individualistic."

Epstein, author of two books on poker, "The Greatest Book of Poker for Winners" and "Hold'em or Fold'em", has spent the last five years teaching poker at senior centers, such as the Culver City Senior Center and the Claude Pepper Senior Citizen Center, located at 1760 S. La Cienega Blvd. He is leading a special poker conference and tournament at the Hustler Casino on Friday.

The session at Olympia Medical marked Epstein's second session working with people with Alzheimer's disease, and each event was made possible through the support of Leeza's Place, who have recently partnered with Olympia Medical's Center for Geriatric

Health.

"It was an invigorating afternoon, and was a great way to evoke cognitive stimulation, social interaction and was just fun," said Sheila Moore, director of the Center for Geriatric Health at

Olympia Medical, speaking of the first poker session. "It helped many remember former days of card playing. It was a great opportunity to sit around and discuss something new."

The Center for Geriatric Health



photo by Tim Posada

Poker expert George Epstein believes the game can help people with Alzheimer's disease.

at Olympia Medical is a multi-disciplinary team, providing services for senior citizens for more than 20 years. According to Moore, the team's approach to memory impairment involves more than assisting any individual patient.

"When a senior citizen has a memory impairment, there's often someone there that makes up for the memories being lost," Moore said. "This means that we always treat two people. The person with the impairment and the person alongside them."

To this end, Olympia Medical has sought the partnership of Leeza's Place to provide caregivers with needed resources. Leeza's Place is a national organization with locations in Florida, Texas, Illinois, New York and California. Each location is run by a Leeza Care Advocate, who serve as guides rather than hands-on physicians.

"Caregivers have to come with their loved ones," Wyte said. "We're trying to use a combination of education, empowerment, and energy."

According to Wyte, Leeza's Place is not an overnight care provider but a resource for caregivers and people diagnosed with any form of memory loss. For more information on Leeza's Place visit the website, www.leezas-place.org.