

Whether volunteering or working for pay, more seniors are putting off retirement to stay active

Published: Sunday, August 21, 2011, 12:00 PM



Cal Langejans of Holland conducts the Evergreen Chorale, which is for singers 50 and up.

By Deborah J. Cook

Cal Langejans of Holland keeps trying, but he just can't seem to hang up his conductor's baton.

After 30 years of teaching music in the West Ottawa public schools, Langejans retired from teaching — only to become director of the Holland Chorale, which he helped found in the 1960s as a volunteer.

He spent the first 10 years of his retirement continuing to fill his life, and that of others, with music. Eventually, the lengthy rehearsals became too much, and he retired from directing the chorale as well.

“I figured that was it,” he said. But it wasn't.

Other retired members of the Holland Chorale gathered at Evergreen Commons in the fall of 2001, to talk about starting a chorus just for fun. They started with 26 people and, through word-of-mouth, immediately grew to 100.

“Now, twice a year we have auditions,” Langejans said. “Anyone 50 years or older can audition, and it's now limited to 110 singers.”

The group has toured Europe, produced CDs, been invited to perform at the National Cathedral

and draws 3,400 to 4,000 people every year at Tulip Time. “It’s a big song and dance musical,” the 74-year-old said. “They’re amazed that old people can do that much.”

Useful and fulfilled

These days, putting off retirement has become common, but that isn’t necessarily a negative thing. Those who have had to extend their working years are finding out what productive retirees have known all along: There are health benefits to remaining engaged in society.

Regardless of whether the second act of life revolves around work for pay or volunteerism, the key is finding ways to feel useful and fulfilled.

“Recessions tend to be associated with decreases in mortality and improvements in physical health,” said John Bound of the National Bureau of Economic Research, professor of economics and faculty research associate at the Populations Studies Center at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Bound points out that work and work-related activities may be the primary forms of physical activity for some individuals, and that the social networks formed at work, important to emotional and mental health, weaken at retirement.

“I think retirement is overrated,” said John Wierenga, president of Wierenga Asset Management in Byron Center. “It seems to me, while you have your health and your strength and your livelihood and all of those things, invest for the day when you may not have that.”

Wierenga himself is making the most of a second act, having opened an investment advisory firm in 2002, after his job disappeared in a bank merger.

“If you have your health, don’t waste it on retirement,” he said. “Give it back ... If you enjoy what you do and enjoy your work and have fun with it, why give it up and go do nothing?”

Ila Yonker finds great fulfillment spending time helping others. Yonker volunteers as her church treasurer, helps with transportation or meals for the homebound, has been a long time volunteer in Holland Right-to-Life and works in an adult day health program and a prime time program, keeping people active physically and mentally.

“It’s probably kept me from being despondent,” said Yonker, who was invited to volunteer after she lost her husband. “When I can see one of the participants do something that they have not been able to do before, that gives me great joy.”

Yonker credits her good health and good attitude, in part, to her volunteer activities.

“I have told many people that if their life seems empty, get out and volunteer. You’ll forget all about your problems and you’ll just concentrate on what you’ll do for others.”

It makes for a great second act.