

THE SUNDAY FRAME



PHOTOS BY MADDY JONES/MJONES@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

George Knox, a Maggie Valley resident and longtime pinochle player, organizes his cards while Beverly Slone deals at the Haywood County Senior Resource Center. The resource center is run by Mountain Projects, a community-based non profit that provides services to the elderly, disadvantaged and general public in Western North Carolina.

AROUND THE PINOCHLE TABLE

Fellowship and a way to keep the mind active

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“Bidding starts at fifty. Twenty points to save meld. Must have a royal marriage to name trump. 10 card is worth more than a king. Who won the trick?”

These are just a few of the thoughts that flashed through my mind as I feverishly tried to follow the game rules explained to me by my new partner George Knox, a Maggie Valley resident and longtime pinochle player.

For those of you who know how to play pinochle, the terms and phrases above make sense. For someone like myself — who played once during childhood with my grandparents — I was completely overwhelmed.

I had walked into the Haywood County Senior Resource Center with the intention to photograph a pinochle group. Expecting a few groups of people to be playing, instead I walked into a small room, with off-white walls and fluorescent lights, to find three people sitting at a table with one empty chair.

“Why don’t you sit down and join us?” Knox had said.

Knox, with the help of the two other players, Beverly Slone and Joy Teetsel, began to explain the rules of double deck pinochle. New terms like “trump” and “meld” were thrown at me while Knox looked me straight in the eyes with the openness of a longtime friend and the strictness of a drill sergeant.

I began to learn about my companions as the game started, and they eased me into this world like a parent holding up a shaky child on their two-wheel bike for the first time. Knox was a basketball coach for most of his life and was a sniper in the Special Forces from 1965-71 in Panama.

It was his time as a Green Beret that he learned pinochle from his comrades. Knox was thrown into the competitive card game, describing how terrified he was to “bid” for his first two weeks playing. It makes sense that nearly 50 years later, he would begin a pinochle group and teach newcomers with the same good-hearted intensity that was taught to him.

After Teetsel, a Waynesville resident, approached the center five years ago to begin game groups of all kinds — Mexican train dominoes, hearts and more — Knox then started the pinochle group.

“When you challenge your brain, it keeps working,” Knox said.

“It also keeps our tempers up,” Teet-



Points are scored through certain combinations of cards, called melds. Pictured here, is a marriage, the king and queen of clubs, and a run, cards of the same suit listed in descending order, ace, 10, king, queen and jack.



Knox writes down each team's scores. Double deck pinochle is played with four players, in sets of two partners. With a pinochle deck of 80 cards, teams bid the number of points they think they will win and win tricks to receive such. The first partnership to achieve 500 points wins.

sel quipped back and the three burst out in laughter.

The three recalled times of play getting heated and players storming out. A few more seniors make up the group, some were newcomers to the game and others well-seasoned. Pinochle is a way to keep the mind active to combat forgetfulness that can come with age, Slone said.

The trio chatted about the weather, Slone and Teetsel's photography hobby, and the health of other pinochle players, all the while playfully making jabs. Talk turned to their friend and fellow pinochle player, Tom. Their faces darkened and I could guess what had happened.

Knox remembered the last phone conversation he had with Tom before



After the initial bidding, Joy Teetsel lays down her meld to count up how many points she has.



Beverly Slone laughs during conversation while waiting her turn during a game of double deck pinochle. The pinochle group meets at 1 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday.

he passed, recalling how hard it was to understand him with a voice deteriorated by throat cancer.

“That was a hard day,” Slone said slowly, remembering when the pinochle group met to play without Tom there for the first time.

Not only is pinochle about keeping the mind sharp, but also getting out to socialize and meet people. The good company and the new, bewildering world of pinochle made the hours fly by. In the end, I could mostly comprehend the game, and I even did something right to earn a high-five from Knox.

As I walked down the hall to leave, laughter and conversation floated into the hallway from other small, off-white, fluorescent rooms like the one I just left. The pinochle crew, and all the others, offer company, friendship, mental stimulation, and quite simply, a place to play a game. They're always looking for new players, regardless of pinochle experience.

“Everybody just loves the game,” Knox said.

Those interested in joining can contact George Knox at 828-944-0423.