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COMMUNITY SUPPORT: Maureen O'Neill standing with Alan and Rita, Friends of the Village who use the many facilities on offer at Lovat Fields

JUMPING FOR JOY: Residents enjoy the facilities and community atmostphere at ExtraCare retirement village Lovat Fields

COUPLE GIVE UP LUXURY LIFESTYLE TO BREED RARE PIGS – PAGE 47

Retirement village a lifeline for Maureen after husband's death

by Georgina Butler
01908 651241 editorial@mkcitizen.co.uk

WHEN pensioner Maureen O'Neill's husband of 46 years, Bill, died this August, she received 140 cards and the crematorium was standing-room only.

They had lived in Linford since 1978 – Mr O'Neill was an educational officer at Leon School, Mrs O'Neill deputy head at White Spires School, Bletchley – but 76-year-old Maureen attributes the support received when Bill passed away to friendships formed after retirement.

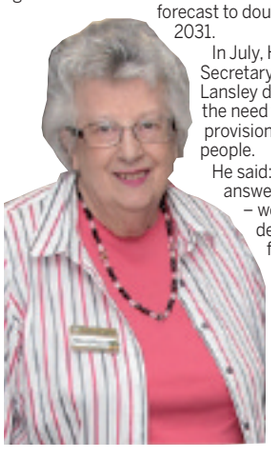
They joined Lovat Fields Retirement Village, Willen Park, in July 2007, shortly after it opened.

Endorsed by the local authority and built to provide affordable sheltered housing and a range of services for people over 55, the Village is operated by The ExtraCare Charitable Trust, in partnership with Milton Keynes Council.

Work is under way on another Village in Shenley Wood, to be completed by Spring 2012.

As the first UK city with two retirement villages, Milton Keynes has a growing population and the number of people aged over 60 is expanding faster than the national average.

The most recent Population Bulletin shows there were almost 38,000 people aged 60 and over in 2008. This number is forecast to double by 2031.



In July, Health Secretary Andrew Lansley described the need for provision for older people.

He said: "The answer is clear – we must develop a funding system for adult care and support that offers choice, is fair, provides value for money and is sustainable for the public finances in the long term."

The question is whether Milton Keynes is responding appropriately.

Councillor Sam Potts, Cabinet Member responsible for older people at Milton Keynes Council, said: "We know it's not everyone's cup of tea but it does give older people in Milton Keynes more choice about how they want to live their lives for the future."

He explained: "Milton Keynes Council works with a wide range of partners to make sure that as people get older – and sometimes frailer – they can remain as independent as possible in their own homes for as long as possible.

"Living in a village setting such Lovat Fields can give, for those who want it, a really great way of life."

The Care Quality Commission's latest rating for Lovat Fields is two-star good service, out of a possible three stars.

ExtraCare Villages offer communal facilities in a Village Centre, including a gym, restaurant, assisted bathroom, arts and crafts centre, IT suite, hairdressers, library, woodwork shop, greenhouse and garden.

Friends of the Village – local people over 55 – also use these facilities.

Not all residents require domiciliary care – two thirds remain independent.

On visiting, there is almost a sense of being in university halls, as people discuss the day ahead in modern, aesthetic surroundings.

Maureen O'Neill enjoys whist and crib events, volunteering on reception and attending the reminiscence group.

She said: "My diary is essential as I often have days with only an hour to catch up with housework."

Ann Allen, ExtraCare Capital Funds Manager explained the aim is to empower people to be independent.

She said: "The Village is almost a microcosm of society and people are encouraged to interact.

"It is a 21st Century community designed for independence, with the security of knowing help is there if and when needed."

There is a waiting list of 500 people to join a Village in Milton Keynes.

Nick Abbey, chief executive of The ExtraCare Charitable Trust said: "We aim to make our Villages available to people regardless of their circumstances, through opportunities to buy, to rent, or to part-buy and also their level of dependence.

"About one third of those moving to Shenley Wood will be receiving some form of care, possibly quite intensive nursing care, while others will not be, having chosen to live there for the excellent lifestyle we can offer."

One person hoping to be a resident of the new Village is 68-year-old Brian Hobbs.

As a member of ExtraHope, the group helping raise the £1.2 million needed to fund the Shenley Village Centre, Brian completed the Great North Run 2010 in September.

He rejects negative connotations surrounding retirement: "The idea of being a burden is changing. Villages give people who want to contribute opportunities to do so, through volunteering and getting involved."

The ExtraCare Charitable Trust advocates 'better lives for older people' and focuses on the provision of choice.

The new Village has received £4.85 million through Milton Keynes Partnership and £3.5 million from The Department of Health and residents will never have to sell their Village home to pay for care.

Supporting the Village option, Iain Stewart, MP for Milton Keynes South, said: "I think the ExtraCare Village concept plays an important role in giving older people a diversity of choice."

The idea of a Village community will not appeal to everyone.

Dr Caroline Holland, Open University Research Associate and Social Gerontologist, explained the question of whether people found the concept feasible depended on their resources and support.

She concludes: "But for now, retirement villages can offer many older people a very agreeable place to live and receive some level of support and they are clearly very popular locally, given the waiting lists."

The fiercely independent may dismiss the Village concept but existing residents are staunch supporters of their community.

This is expressed best by Maureen O'Neill: "If I had not had this Village's support I would never have felt so strong or so loved as I do now.

"Bill said he had more friends in the Village than at any other time in his life.

"I agree with this – I feel so loved within this community and it helps me enormously."

> To support the appeal contact Ann Allen at ExtraCare on 07825171546 or ann.allen@extracare.org.uk.

'If I had not had this Village's support I would never have felt so strong or so loved as I do now' – Maureen O'Neill

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schoolsandlearning

OVER THE MOON: More students are looking forward to following in these youngsters' footsteps

Diamond opportunity for lucky youngsters who join Blake tour

SHOWBIZ-MAD students are counting down the days until they perform with Brit-award-winning classical group Blake.

The group have been busy searching nationwide for choirs to join them on stage as part of their UK tour.

And lucky performers from the Diamond School of Performing Art in Newport Pagnell will be in the spotlight on November 10 for a performance at The Grove Theatre, Dunstable.

The students will sing some of the group's well=known classic pop renditions, including 'Hallelujah' and 'Jerusalem'.

Members of Blake say they found their love of music at a young age and wanted to share their own passion with the communities they are visiting on tour.

The Diamond School of Performing Arts have previously performed with Blake before. Director Paula Diamond said: "Those who missed out last time are over the moon to be part of this concert.

"The parents are very much looking forward to the performance after speaking so highly of the previous show."

The number of students taking part will be almost double the number who had the opportunity last time.

Paula added: "It is an amazing experience for the students – one of the best ever.

"Blake are a super bunch of lads and they were so good with the students taking time to chat to them.

"We feel very privileged to be asked to do another show with them."

>Anyone who wants tickets should call 01582 602080.

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Strictly the best for dance school

by Georgina Butler
01908 651241 editorial@mkcitizen.co.uk

IT takes two to tango but only one dance centre to satisfy a growing demand for ballroom dancing in Milton Keynes.

The Jill Foster Dance Centre which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, has seen a renewed public interest in dance.

Aiming to provide dancing for fun and fitness, the centre has eight schools across Milton Keynes with many students inspired by glitzy BBC One show Strictly Come Dancing to take up classes.

Jill Kemp opened the Jill Foster Dance Centre in 1980 and caters for more than 700 students. With a string of qualifications and awards after her name, Jill is enthusiastic about getting everyone dancing, regardless of ability.

She said: "I think initially there was a huge positive reaction to Strictly.

"Viewers have seen that athletes, sportsmen and women, actors and various other celebrities have endorsed dancing as not only a great social event, but also as a good way of keeping fit and staying trim."

The Dance Centre offers a range of classes for all age groups. Ballroom and Latin American dancing is introduced to children as young as three in Mini Movers classes and Superstars classes allow progression for those aged six.

ENCORE: Students dancing in the 30th anniversary show in June – Strictly fans can join classes to imitate the stars

There are also junior classes for children from seven years and adult classes and short courses for dancers aged from 16 years.

Jill said: "All of these classes are well attended and some of the children's classes even have a waiting list.

"Many adults prefer to learn on a one-on-one basis however, and the five-week learn to dance courses are also proving successful."

"We offer affordable tuition at a range of venues for all ages and capabilites so why not come along for a free lesson."

The Dance Centre has venues at Woughton Leisure Centre, Shenley Leisure Centre, Maulden Lower School near Ampthill, Two Mile Ash Community Annexe, Walton High School, Medbourne Community Sports Pavilion, Tickford Park in Newport Pagnell and Wavendon Gate Pavilion.

For more information call 01908 508697 or jill@jfdc.co.uk

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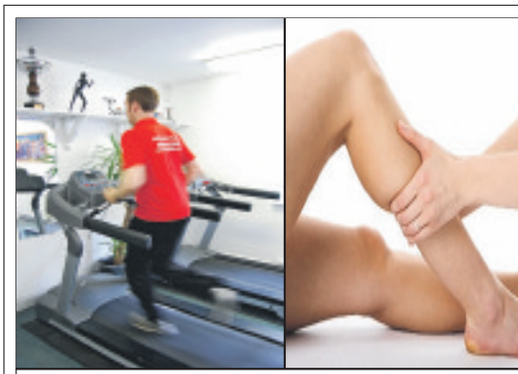
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HALF MILLION VIEWS FOR YOUTUBE SINGER

Online opera a hit for teacher

by Georgina Butler

01908 651241 editorial@mkcitizen.co.uk

AS his twilight years approach, one city college teacher is embracing the world of iTunes to spread enjoyment of his music.

David Jones, 70, is a Welsh opera singer who combines his vocal talent with his day job as a part-time IT teacher at Milton Keynes College.

In a move that may inspire others, he has started uploading his recordings online and keeping his Youtube channel 'Voce Versatile' updated.

In 1970, David had the opportunity to join Welsh National Opera, but family life was priority.

He said: "I am a frustrated wannabe, I want to fulfil my potential."

But this 'wannabe' has flourished and his new-found success online has seen his YouTube channel approach half a million hits.

As a skilled singer and actor, David has performed in and around Milton Keynes since 1985, while holding down teaching jobs.

He credits his job with keeping him internet savvy, but admits he had to learn more.

> Contact Milton Keynes College on 01908 684444 for course information or visit 'Voce Versatile' to see David perform.

FRUSTRATED WANNABE: David Jones is finally finding success with his singing

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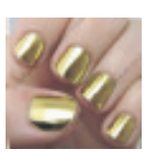

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