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The ADVOCATE

Miles of Smiles: Happiness Club Founder Spreads Positive Message

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The Advocate

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photos by Chris Preovolos



WESTPORT - Lionel Ketchian talks about finding happiness the way some people talk about finding Jesus. It was Christmas Eve 1990 when he saw the light.

"I noticed I felt content, but I thought: 'I'm living in the real world, bad things are going to happen, this can't last,' " Ketchian said recently. "I became aware of: 'When am I going to lose it and what am I going to lose it to?' And then I realized that I didn't have to lose it, and that was 16 years ago."

Since then, Ketchian has spread the word. In 2000, he founded the original Happiness Club after teaching popular evening courses on happiness at Sacred Heart University. When the classes ended, his students didn't want to stop meeting.

The Happiness Club, which includes several original members, teaches what Ketchian calls "emotional competence" at free weekly meetings at the Fairfield Public Library. It also includes chapters in California, Maryland, North Carolina and Canada. The newest chapter will open in Madison in October. In February, Ketchian began weekly meetings at Bridge House in Bridgeport, an outpatient clinic for psychiatric rehabilitation. Local meetings, like the Smiling Single Seniors Happiness Club's last Thursday night, drew about 40 participants to hear a speaker address the topic of finding happiness.

Club meetings are hard to miss. The room for Thursday's gathering at the Westport Senior Center was clearly marked by a yellow street sign reading "Be Happy Zone," and two yellow Mylar smiley-face balloons. Ketchian wore one of his many trademark smiley-face ties and passed out the latest Happiness Club newsletter, peppered liberally with smiley-face emoticons.

"What I've come to realize is that when you're happy, you're in an emotionally better place, you're accessing higher wisdom and you're more levelheaded," Ketchian said. "Instead of saying, 'Why do I have the problem, it comes down to saying what are my choices here?'" Ketchian defines happiness as "an inner state of well-being that enables you to profit from your highest thoughts, intelligence, wisdom, awareness, common sense, emotions, health and spiritual values."

The man behind the Happiness Club has been married 38 years and is a father of three and

grandfather of two. Ketchian, 61, of Fairfield, is president of a printing company in Fairfield and leads the Happiness Club in his free time. His resume as a self-made happiness specialist includes radio shows, television specials and several books.

"People think you're fooling around if you're happy, but I disagree. I say you can be happy all the time," Ketchian said. Public figures such as Oprah Winfrey and Deepak Chopra have brought the concept of happiness to the fore, said Ketchian, who posts a top-20 list of books on the topic of happiness on his Web site.

He also notes a recent trend in happiness studies. The most popular course at Harvard University last spring was entitled "Positive Psychology" and books such as "Your Best Life Now" by Joel Osteen sit high on The New York Times bestseller list.

The Smiling Seniors Singles branch began in January 2005 at the behest of Stacy Enyeart, president of the Westport-Weston AARP. Enyeart thought single seniors could benefit from their own version of the club.

"I got into it because I was at a Happiness Club meeting and I left and looked around at people and said, 'My gosh, everyone is smiling,'" Enyeart said. "It truly is contagious."

Karen Heffner, 57, of Norwalk, who works with Enyeart on the public access cable television program "Creative Women Today," went to her first Happiness Club meeting Thursday. She works as the operations manager of a Stamford mortgage company.

"I've never gone to a group like this before and I don't necessarily agree with everything said because I think we all approach happiness differently," Heffner said. "But it's a lot nicer to meet people who are happy than people who aren't."

Ketchian's new faith was tested a year after that fateful Christmas Eve, when his father suffered a heart attack. Ketchian said he decided it would be a waste of months of work at practicing happiness to succumb to depression over his father's illness. He said he believes that his father reacted positively to his son's inner happiness, rebounding much faster than doctors had expected.

The realization that you can determine your own happiness is empowering, Ketchian said.

"When you start to see the logic of happiness and utilize it to deal with problems in life, it becomes a very commonsense approach to handling problems. There's nothing wacky about it, it's not a miracle or anything, it's just taking ultimate responsibility."

In the future, Ketchian hopes to develop an emotional competence seminar to be taught in schools. It's all in keeping with his ultimate goal. "My whole purpose is just to give people a chance to learn the benefits of happiness," he said. "I don't have to have a stupid, big smile all the time, but I really feel it, I live it, it's here," he said as he tapped his heart.

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