NINA MOINI: What do pottery, pasta making, and pickleball have in common? You can learn about all of them through a community education class. Minnesota school districts offer an incredible variety of classes for people of all ages, interests, and skill levels.

And right now, community education professionals from across the state are gathered in Rochester for the Minnesota Community Education Association's Annual Conference to share ideas and prep for the year ahead. Here to share more is Annette Sallman, President of the Minnesota Community Education Association. Annette, welcome to *Minnesota Now.*

ANNETE SALLMAN: Thank you. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: So for people who might not be familiar with community education, explain how it works. These programs are offered through local school districts, and they're open to more than just students?

ANNETE SALLMAN: Correct. We are there for you at every age and stage of life.

[CHUCKLES]

We start with our early childhood family education programs all the way up to our senior citizens programming.

NINA MOINI: And let's go back to the start of community education in the United States. Really, how did this become a concept? How has it grown?

ANNETE SALLMAN: So around 1935, the Mott Foundation launched a school-based recreation program that was serving children in Flint, Michigan. The idea of keeping the lights on after school-- known as the "lighted schoolhouse," really took off in the late '40s, early '50s. And when you think about it, it makes some sense, because we were at war and women were needed in the workforce. so no one was at home after school. And so schools were naturally a good place for children to engage in recreational programs after school.

NINA MOINI: OK.

ANNETE SALLMAN: And they are located in spaces that are available evenings, weekends, and during the summer.

NINA MOINI: And how has it changed since that time?

ANNETE SALLMAN: So it really expanded significantly in the late '60s, early '70s, and started to embrace a broader spectrum of ages and different types of programs. And if you talk with community educators, they'll explain we're not a "one size fits" all sort of program. We come into our communities and find the gaps.

The community members, what are they interested in doing? And what types of things can we offer them that will engage them in lifelong learning? So you can see everything from sports activities to theater activities. There's also things like adult basic education and adults with disabilities programming. So it's a pretty broad spectrum of programming.

NINA MOINI: And in fact, really the variety of classes is pretty remarkable. Can you give us a sense of what people can find? What are some examples of classes that might even surprise people to know that you offer?

ANNETE SALLMAN: Right. Well, goat yoga-- let's start there.

NINA MOINI: Wait. Goat yoga? Not just go yoga.

[LAUGHTER]

Goat yoga?

ANNETE SALLMAN: Correct.

[LAUGHS]

That one's pretty fun. Another one that I heard about right here at the conference, PuzzlePalooza. That is a multigenerational activity where people come together, they form a team, and they put together a puzzle and see who can put it together the fastest. Another really fun one. I heard was Bingo and Breakfast for senior citizens. They get together, they have a little bite to eat, they socialize, and they play some bingo.

NINA MOINI: How does a community decide which classes to offer? Given the fact that there are so many options out there, does it really depend on teachers who want to teach it? Like, how do you get a gauge for what's going to really pique your community's interest?

ANNETE SALLMAN: That's a very good question. It happens in a multitude of ways, of course, as you can imagine. Some of it starts with the fact that we are directly connected with our school districts. So We're always looking for ways that we can contribute and support learning for our school-age children.

From there, we also then look into our communities, and we find people who have skills that they can share with our community. So you might find someone who is good at woodworking, and you invite them into your school where you have a shop, and now you can bring community members in and they're going to produce something together.

And so some of it has to do with the facilities that you have available to you. Some of it has to do with the interests of your community. So it varies quite a bit. We work with individuals who come to us and say, "Hey, I have this skill and I'd like to do this. I do this in multiple communities." And then we also look at community needs. So in recent years, one of our focuses has been on mental health. And so we will find ways to weave that into our programming at all ages, starting with our early childhood.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I mean, there's clearly a lot of work that goes into making these programs happen. So why does the Minnesota Community Education Association need to exist? How does it help the local program stay strong?

ANNETE SALLMAN: First of all, I think we're very fortunate that Minnesotans believe in lifelong learning. They want to be engaged in opportunities that will keep them healthy and strong mentally and physically, and so they demand those opportunities.

And when we started back in the '50s, we were looking at, we have the children coming in, but we still have all of these learning spaces that we could use for our adults as well. And why not have that exercise class in the gymnasium? And why not have that dance class? We have a kiln, so let's have a pottery class. So it just really took off from there.

NINA MOINI: It does seem-- maybe I'm biased-- that Minnesota has a particularly rich network of community programs. Do you have a theory on why that is?

ANNETE SALLMAN: Part of it is that the state legislature, and this was back again in the '70s. They dedicated some funds to community education. We at this point have a variety of funds that are available that support different parts of our programs. So you can imagine one of our programs is preschool, and I'm sure your listeners know about all of the different challenges around affordability with preschool.

Well, school districts are offering it and there is a funding source to help families access it. So that's just one way that we're maximizing the dollars in Minnesota, to make sure that people have access and strong programming for them at all ages and stages.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I'm curious what first drew you to community ed, and whether you still take classes yourself.

ANNETE SALLMAN: Yes, in fact, I certainly do. While I was getting my teaching degree, I was working in an after-school program that happens to be run by community education-- Discovery Club in St. Paul, we'll shout out there. And what really caught my attention is that community education allowed me to imagine what I wanted the learner to get. In community education, we're looking at what are the things that they're passionate about, what are the things that they want to explore, so that they can understand where their interests lie. We get to try all kinds of different things, and it feels like a buffet--

[LAUGHTER]

--of exciting opportunities. So how could I pass that up?

NINA MOINI: Yeah. So tell us what a few classes are that you've taken in the last couple of years that really piqued your interest.

ANNETE SALLMAN: We do offer financial classes, and one of the things that was very important to my family was when my kids were exploring college, we needed how to afford it. So we took a course through our community education so that my husband and I were prepared by the time they went off to school. We've taken other finance classes. I did take a technology class a few years back. And then I've taken some arts and crafts classes just for fun. So a myriad of things.

NINA MOINI: That's fantastic. Thanks so much for joining us today, Annette.

ANNETE SALLMAN: Of course.

NINA MOINI: That was Annette Sallman, President of the Minnesota Community Education Association.