

## The Mediterranean way: The Easthampton Council on Aging offers men a path to healthy living

By Patrick Hoff Gazette Contributing Writer Monday, June 15, 2015 (Published in print: Tuesday, June 16, 2015)

Inside the old post office that serves as the Easthampton Council on Aging and Enrichment Center on a recent afternoon, 15 men sat listening to dietitian Bill Bradley talk about his trip to the Greek island of Crete.

But it wasn't because they wanted to hear about his vacation.

"The reason I went there is because traditionally they are the healthiest people in the world," Bradley told them. "Every person that I interviewed there had relatives that had lived to be 115 to 120 years old."

These men — ranging in age from mid-50s to early 90s — were gathered to learn some ways to better their own health. Bradley, who runs a website and works with corporations and hospitals to lead workshops, was conducting the first of a four-week session for men on eating well, exercise and routine health testing. As part of the deal, he would prepare a healthy meal for them each week.

Bradley, 51, who is a strong advocate of the Mediterranean diet, which, inspired by the cuisine of Greece, Southern Italy and Spain focuses on olive oil, nuts, fruits, vegetables and fish, said he was impressed by what he observed on that trip nearly a decade ago.

"I saw this one guy who I thought was about 60, and he was lifting these huge stones to make a stone garden," Bradley said. "He had a wheelbarrow and he was going up a hill. I was sitting in ... basically a bar and I asked the bartender, 'That guy's amazing for someone in his 60s, that he can lift that up.' And he goes, 'Oh, he's in his 90s.'"

Bradley had gone to Crete to learn more about the diet he had encountered while working in a program at Noble Hospital in Westfield that focused on heart disease. Many of the male heart patients there were put on the Mediterranean diet.

The diet has been shown, Bradley said, to decrease a person's risk of "almost every disease there is," including cancer, diabetes, arthritis, erectile dysfunction, dementia, memory loss and Alzheimer's. Recently, the diet has also been shown to increase the length of telomeres on cells, which are often used as predictors of lifespan, he said.

"It's way inside now — from the top of your head to your toes they've shown it helps with everything."

Bradley said he stayed in Crete for two months, meeting lots of people in their 90s or 100s who were still in great shape.

Ron Morris, 62, a member of the class, said he and the others were hoping to follow a similar health path.

"We all have the same kinds of goals: lose a little weight, feel a little better, that kind of thing," he said. "Plus it's good mentally for guys this age."

### Sampling the diet

When Bradley returned home from Crete, he modeled a program on what he learned.

He also started a website, [MediterraneanLiving.com](http://MediterraneanLiving.com), to provide resources, including wellness programs, recipes and

videos.

“Our vision is to have people live better lifestyles that are enjoyable ... instead of, ‘oh, my god I have to go on a diet,’ or, ‘I have to do this,’” he said.

Although fats are usually taboo in diets, the fats allowed in the Mediterranean diet — such as olive oil — are mainly monounsaturated fat — that can reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels, which is good for heart health, according to the Mayo Clinic website. Canola oil and some nuts contain the beneficial linolenic acid (a type of omega-3 fatty acid) as well as healthy unsaturated fat. Omega-3 fatty acids — found in fish suggested by the diet — lower triglycerides, decrease blood clotting, help control blood pressure and are associated with a decreased incidence of sudden heart attack, the website says. Antioxidants in fruits and vegetables, along with natural anti-inflammatories, help maintain brain function.

“It’s “really, really good for you,” Bradley said, and “it’s really, really tasty. So it’s a good combination. People who don’t think they like healthy food really love this diet.”

The men in the class would get a chance to see for themselves as most of the meals Bradley would prepare for them would be based on the diet.

Bradley said eating Mediterranean doesn’t mean becoming vegetarian, a fact that appeared to relieve some of those in the class.

“I’m all for it, but I like meat too. I like meat a lot,” said Bob First, 92.

The first dish Bradley made for the class — actually more Mexican than Mediterranean, he noted — was a black bean stew, from a cookbook he co-wrote.

It contained spinach, beans, tomatoes, peppers and various spices. It also included a key ingredient of every Mediterranean dish: olive oil. Bradley explained that all oils have the same amount of fat, so using olive oil isn’t about conserving calories, but about gaining health benefits.

“Any olive oil that’s a real extra virgin olive oil is an anti-inflammatory,” he said. Basically inflammation is associated with the ills in your body — like nearly every type of disease or pain, he said.

Fresh olive oil, he said, leaves a slight burning sensation in the throat and Cretans take a shot of it every day.

That revelation caused a stir among the men.

Don’t worry, Bradley told them, while Cretan olive oil is delicious, taking a shot of it every day is not something he recommends. But he did allow the participants a chance to try it, walking around the rooming offering each a spoonful.

Most took him up on it.

“Slides right through you,” commented one.

Coughing and chatter ensued and Bradley asked if they could feel the burn. He got a chorus of “yeahs” in response. One man compared it to flax oil, which Bradley agreed could have the same effect.

Olive oil would loom large in the rest of the classes, Bradley told them. He would be using a lot of it in his cooking.

Exercise, too

The course, though, covers more than just food — it’s also about the lifestyle.

“The people on the Mediterranean are much less stressed out than we are,” Bradley said, because they spend hours eating dinner, enjoying and celebrating their food with wine and moonshine.

“They think of food as something they eat for their bodies,” he said.

At the end of the class, the men were served portions of the black bean stew. Most wanted second helpings. As they ate, Bradley told them that the second week would focus on exercise to improve balance, muscle mass and some back problems.

He also explained a walking program he created, a virtual journey across the 162-mile island of Crete. Over the four-week program, the men would record the miles they walk each day, and whoever walks the farthest will win a prize.

“It’s a good prize, and it’s from me,” Bradley said, chuckling. “But I don’t know what it is yet.”

Frank Steplar was excited by the Mediterranean diet and Bradley’s program.

“You can always learn something about exercise, especially for an aging person,” he said. “I’m 80 years old, and I do exercises, but also there’s balance ... trying to keep life in balance with everything — physically, mentally, morally, financially and spiritually fit.”

Strong for the next act

Kim Jensen, activity coordinator for the Council on Aging, said she’s pleased with the turnout for the program, which is offered free to participants through a grant for men’s health from Cooley Dickinson Hospital, “which we’re very grateful for.” It is the first men’s health program the Enrichment Center has held.

Men’s health programs normally aren’t this successful,” Bradley said. “Usually men don’t come to things like this, so to have 15 men come is really amazing.”

The goal of the program was to make it “really easy and fun,” Jensen said.

She said statistics have shown that men aren’t likely to seek help for their health. Part of the reluctance, she said, is a trait of “macho” masculinity held by a previous generation. Courses like Bradley’s, she said, aim to change that, especially for men who are at a time in their lives when they may be discouraged because their bodies aren’t what they once were.

“The point is to go into your next act in a good way, in a healthy way,” she said. “You want to be strong for that. You don’t want to have a decline,” she said. “You want to keep your status quo as much as possible. That’s what makes a good old age.”

As an incentive to finish the program, the Enrichment Center is offering participants a free hot shave during the final class, and Bradley said he’ll prepare a healthy outdoor barbecue for them.

Stephar is pleased the Enrichment Center is offering a men’s health class.

“We haven’t had that here at the senior’s center. It’s nice to see,” he said. He also discounts the claims that men aren’t interested in seeking health advice. “It’s good to see the turnout for men, because we get accused of not taking care of ourselves. But I firmly believe that men take better care of themselves than women.”

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