

'Aging ain't for sissies'

■ Family Center offers help to seniors

By Lisa Toller

Tribune Guest Writer

"Aging ain't for sissies", my 82-year old mother is fond of saying.

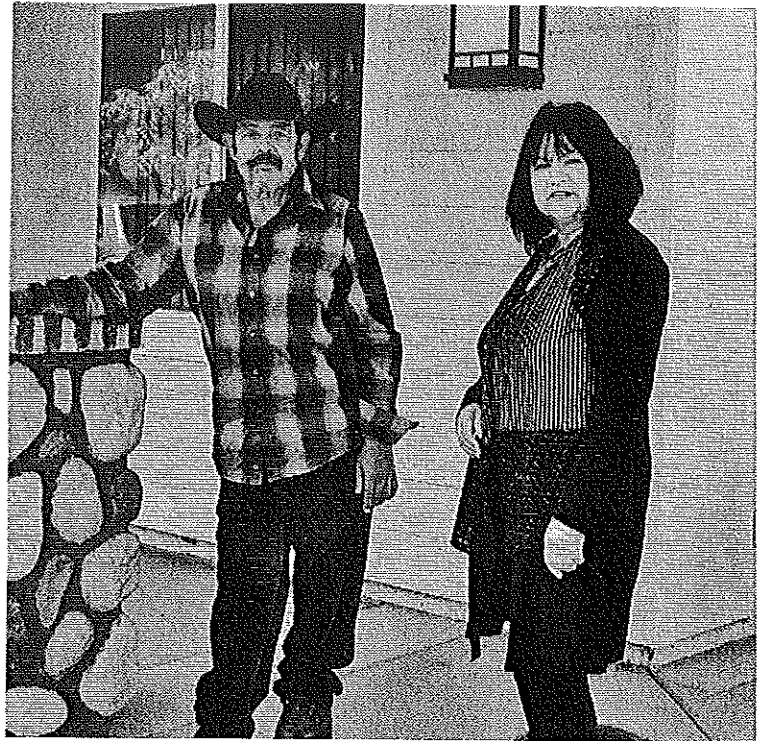
And, she's right, it takes a certain amount of courage and determination to deal with the challenges so many seniors face: failing health, caring for a loved one who is ill, living on a fixed income, and finding affordable housing – just to name a few.

It's no wonder that a large number of seniors battle isolation and depression (late life depression affects 6 million Americans age 65 and older). The good news is Calistoga's seniors don't have to manage these issues on their own.

I sat down recently with Elena Mendez, the Senior and Family Services Manager for the UpValley Family Center in Calistoga, to find out more about the programs available for seniors – a group that amounts to about 20 percent of Calistoga's population.

One of the programs, a collaboration with agency partners, is the "Lunch & Learn" that is held one Wednesday every month at the Community Center. The two hour program is usually attended by between 20 and 28 people who receive a lunch provided by St. Helena Hospital, participate in a fun activity, and listen to a speaker on topics ranging from navigating Medicare to preventing falls to getting financial assistance.

Mendez says the personal connection that seniors make at these



COURTESY PHOTO

Elena Mendez (right), Senior and Family Services Manager for the UpValley Family Center in Calistoga talks with Jose Vega about the programs and services.

events is vital in preventing isolation and improving mental health.

Another way the UpValley Family Center supports mental health is through its partnership with Mentis, Napa County's mental health provider. Mentis provides low-cost counseling services for families and seniors one day a week at the Family Center's office, both in Spanish and English. Mendez handles the referral process, which entails Medicare/Medicaid clients first being assessed at the County's offices before they receive services. Arrangements can be made for the individual to be given a ride to and from Napa if needed.

A new program sprang up last year after Mendez noticed a group of older Latino men sitting in the park in the cold weather and she wanted to give them a warm place to meet. Once a month, anywhere from nine to twelve men get together to socialize and to hear from speakers about topics including elder abuse prevention, spotting scams, Medicare updates, and immigration integration.

Mendez goes the extra mile to make sure Calistoga's seniors like Vega and his wife receive the services that they need and feel a part of the community.