

## **2025 Ann Johnson Senior Center of the Year**

### **Siler City Center for Active Listening**

***When a senior center is in your hometown, it means just a little more. No longer can it be classified as “just a job.”***

Since taking the managerial role at the Siler City Center for Active Living in July 2022, Kathryn Walters has endeavored to change the culture of the center. Upon her arrival, the task was not necessarily simple for her and the center’s activity coordinator, Olivia Hayden. Participants were unsure of the best path forward out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and, along these lines, the center focused more on succeeding at the basics – such as daily meals and providing a safe place for seniors to congregate – than expanding the depth and breadth of its programming. Indeed, when was the appropriate time to “flip the switch?”

The arrival of Walters, a Siler City native, proved to be the transitory moment. In one of several directives that were implemented immediately, she reinstated the center’s Gospel Choir and reached out to potential line dancing instructors once learning of the interest from several participants. Reasons to include programming, such as basketweaving, were actively sought out instead of continuing its suspension. Hayden was empowered to revamp and expand the exercise component. As the duo is apt to say when forging ahead in the face of a temporary problem: “we’re not stopping for a broken leg on a keyboard.”

Seniors in and around Siler City have responded to this relentless tenacity by walking through the center doors – and returning repeatedly. The 2024 calendar year saw average daily attendance more than double compared to when Walters and her current staff began work two years prior. A total of 831 individuals were served at the center this past year, representing an 84% increase from 2022. Certainly, that’s not by accident. Leveraging the familiar sights and sounds of home, Walters, a former schoolteacher in the community, is the daughter of a Siler City-area dentist for over four decades. Perhaps there is no greater illustration of these community bonds than the gentleman who faithfully joins the weekly “Music Jam Session” – her seventh-grade social studies teacher, still known to this day as “Mr. Goldston.” Walters is complemented by Hayden, a young fitness aficionado and rugby player who relates seamlessly to students and participants at the center.

During 2024, Walters and Hayden started to notice a disturbing trend among the seniors that attend the Siler City Center for Active Living. Numerous participants continue to suffer from cases of macular degeneration, contributing to vision loss. Moreover, the son of a participating couple is legally blind, and another participant, who recently died, was completely blind. Combined with Walters almost losing her vision in one eye due to a health concern as a young adult, it became an identified community need to implement a Low Vision Support Group at the center. Currently meeting once a month, this group advocates for seniors – or any individual – with vision challenges. Presentations and support for the group are received from the local Siler City Lions Club, with the group being led by Walters. Interest in the group is steadily growing via targeted marketing efforts, and a special low-vision activity calendar is offered to all participants each month.

Following a successful teaching collaboration with Chatham County Parks and Recreation (“It’s a Great Day.....to Learn Pickleball!”) that focused on pickleball basics and its relative ease of access, center staff capitalized on this momentum by turning the main Holly Brooks Room into a regulation-sized pickleball court space twice a week. A portable net and court lines are put down each Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning. On Wednesday afternoons, older adults from Siler City and surrounding communities join the action, with some coming as far west as Alamance County. An “open gym” setting is observed on Thursday mornings, giving everyone the chance to play pickup games in the traditional rotation setting. The pickleball boom at the center was on full display in December with the first double-elimination “Dink The Halls” doubles tournament at Ernest Ramsey Gymnasium in Siler City.

More seniors are entering the Siler City Center for Active Living for the first time with increased confidence in their ability to navigate technology. Therefore, the staff meets them each Tuesday morning with “The Art of Aging” podcast. Launched in 2024 and broadcasting on the Facebook page of Chatham County Aging Services with roughly 1,900 followers, this program covers a range of aging topics relevant to the community, often centered around upcoming center events and relevant monthly celebrations on the aging calendar. These can include National Falls Prevention Week, the kickoff of Chatham County Senior Games & SilverArts, or the leadup to the premier event of the Aging Services calendar, the annual Healthy Aging Expo. Each week, Walters conducts the program on a solo basis or with a special guest.

Chatham County Aging Services, of which the Siler City center is a part, is responsible for the marketing, outreach and administration of Chatham County Senior Games & SilverArts. In 2024, a total of 375 participants took part, establishing a new record. Of that total, 145 were new participants. The staff of the Siler City center play an invaluable role in the administration of Senior Games by hosting the SilverArts portion of the competition and securing the needed professional sound equipment that meets North Carolina Senior Games standards. An “Open Art Gallery” is held during the SilverArts period for the public to visit the center and view the work of older adult artists at their leisure. During Senior Games, the Siler City center is also home to the women’s bocce and horseshoes competition.

For the last 15 years and interrupted only by inclement weather and COVID-19, the popular “Friday Night Dance” has brought individuals from Siler City and beyond to the center. Each Friday evening, Helen Maness, a local volunteer, secures a weekly band and coordinates the pay-to-enter event, cleaning the center and restoring it to its original condition at the conclusion. On a consistent basis, the dance is the first point of contact for many to the center, exposing its facilities to visitors and individuals who do not otherwise visit during the week.

Hayden oversees a robust exercise schedule which includes sessions focused on the primary goal of getting seniors “up and moving.” She has significantly boosted the number of daily exercise programs at the center, implementing and teaching a variety of classes that aim to achieve notable cardiovascular and strength gains. A weekly Zumba Gold class is offered every Friday morning and the first “Holly Jolly Fun Run” – a 1-mile walk around the perimeter of the center – was held in December with actual timing equipment. With the majority of the center’s exercise schedule held in the morning, Hayden’s exercise schedule has helped to create a natural bridge to the daily congregate meal served just before noon. This has played a key role in the center’s daily congregate lunch participation tripling since 2022, with an average of 80 individuals enjoying a warm meal and conversation in Siler City each day.

Launched via grant funding in 2022, the center is also home to a craft and sewing room. Titled “Quilting and Sewing Time,” a weekly class meets every Tuesday at 8 a.m. to expand upon these skill sets and is typically filled to its capacity. A twice-monthly book club meets in the center library. Books are read by the participants outside of the session and then discussed. In partnership with the Chatham County Center of North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the center launched a Garden Club in 2024 and continues to carry that effort forward into 2025. After the initial launch phase, the group’s work will include creating a pollinator garden at the center in the spring. Participants will start the plants from scratch, including seeds. Owing to an increasing Hispanic population, a monthly Spanish activities calendar is distributed.

Through the leave-no-stone-unturned work of staff at the Siler City Center for Active Living, the center strives to fulfill its mission of making seniors feel at home each day. As Walters and Hayden indicate:

***“We want them to feel like we’ll miss them if they didn’t show up today.”***