

Learning three languages at once

By Yun Mi Park

bedford@wickedlocal.com

"See you soon, moon."

"Thanks, sticky bear."

"You're welcome, muddy piglet. Exactly, merciful plum."

Those were just a few of the phrases that Lee Riethmiller had his students at the Carleton-Willard Village recite in Spanish, Italian and German during the last class of his eight-week TriLingual Three program on Friday, Sept. 6.

Lee is the founder and director of the Intercontinental Foreign Language Program in Harvard Square and has developed curriculum to teach more than one language, often three or more, at one time in an interactive setting.

"When you do things interactively, it's a different brain configuration that kicks off and you are able to learn vocabulary faster," said Lee. "I believe it's a more long-lasting language study because people realize it's doable. And it fits into people's schedules better."

During his undergraduate studies at The Ohio State University, Lee started his foreign language studies with Spanish and French and had a total of nine languages studied by the time he graduated. He went on to study theology at Harvard University, where he added another four languages and then became a Fulbright Scholar to Spain, where he added yet four more.

"My method of teaching more than one language in a single language course has been done many, many times, but it's never been done in a retirement community setting," said Lee.

The idea to teach more than one language at a time came roughly 20 years ago during the holidays when Lee was teaching an Italian and German class back to back.

"My Italian class wanted to have a party before Christmas Eve, and my German class wanted in as well," said Lee. "So we had a celebration

of two languages, and people were exchanging vocabulary and it was a great hit. So I thought 'what if there was some kind of technology available to teach more than one language in a single language course?'

From then on, Lee began writing the material to teach multiple languages at once and is now trying to incorporate his teachings to the Carleton-Willard Village community.

"What I find so interesting with an older group is that they're able to make associations from life experiences, and they're able to absorb things in a more relaxed nature," said Lee. "They're more flexible, they have nothing to prove, and they're here to enjoy themselves. It's a great place for experimentation."

Bill Stern, a Carleton-Willard resident and TriLingual class attendee, says he remembers his Spanish vocabulary better with connections to places.

"When we do a lot of these words, I think of places in California and others, so it helps me remember it better," said Bill. "You feel yourself stretching; I'm not sure enough, but still."

For Cecilia Parks, her former Latin training in school helped provide a foundation for learning now.

"I think I would have gotten much less out of what we've done if it weren't for the fact that I had Latin in high school and had to have two modern spoken languages to graduate from college," said Cecilia. "I'm really enjoying being able to pull back what I remember and have it make sense for learning these languages now, so I think the more ancient

method of learning has important intrinsic value."

For now, Lee uses a vocabulary that strikes entertainment value and learning by juxtaposition.

"I pick words poetically because they are so alive and because I want your attention," said Lee. "These words are striking in every language, and they might be much more effective at a retirement community because I didn't really expect anybody to really study the material, but they have really surprised me."

For more information on the Intercontinental Foreign Language Program, visit www.tonguesinteractive.com.