



**Johnston  
Senior Center**

# Johnston Senior Spotlight

A PUBLICATION OF THE JOHNSTON SENIOR CENTER

WINTER 2026

(401) 944-3343



## From the Director's Desk

Dear Friends,

The start of a new year is about reflection, moving forward and new ways to thrive as we continue to make the Johnston Senior Center a "one-of-a-kind" place for those who want to live an active and enriching life.



Last year, we saw record memberships, which is a compelling indicator of the commitment and impact that the Johnston Senior Center has on our community.

We welcomed some very special guests to the Center, including Bishop Bruce A. Lewandowski, celebrated chef/historian Walter Potenza, and Johnston's own resident pediatrician, "Dr. D," aka Dr. Vincent D'Allessandro, who retired after 62 years in practice.

This year, look for even more visitors and events as we plan to celebrate the Center's 20th year at the Hartford Avenue location.

This Center is a beacon of light, and it comes from the kindness of the special people within it. Learning new things, embracing a greater sense of purpose, and developing meaningful relationships are the keys to living happily as older adults.

We thank you for your involvement over the past year and your continued enthusiasm for upcoming events and community building.

May the new year bring you and your loved ones good health, happiness and hope.

Sincerely,

**Richard J. DeFino, Jr.**  
Executive Director

## Message from the Mayor



Dear Members,

As we begin the winter months, I want to take a moment to wish you a healthy and comfortable start to the new year. Winter can be a quiet season, but it is also an

important time to stay connected, take care of

## Our Mission, Vision and Promise

*To empower adults 55+ to live active, healthy, happy lifestyles by reimagining aging through activities, shared interests, experiences and perspectives, that create a culture and community of belonging.*

## Operations Director's Report

*Happy New Year to  
all of our members!*

It has been an amazing year here at the Johnston Senior Center. Our membership continues to grow by leaps and bounds. Our exercise classes are filled. Card players continue to enjoy our facility on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. We see a marked increase in daily lunch attendance and our weekly trips utilizing our vans continue to be filled by our members.

All in all, it is wonderful to see our state-of-the-art facility being used to the fullest! The staff here continues to do an



outstanding job. They are truly the most caring individuals I have ever worked with. They consistently go above and beyond what is expected of them. They work hard every day to make this facility a welcoming place for all.

Planning for the new year including new destinations for our weekly trips, more informative seminars, and more educational classes are being discussed. More to come on this topic.

AARP will again be preparing tax returns for our members. Preparers will be here weekly on Wednesdays February 4 to April 8. Appointments are from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Contact the front desk to schedule your appointments.

Please be sure to check our website for updates weekly at [jscri.org](http://jscri.org).

**Bob Piscione**  
Operations Director

our health, and make use of the many resources available through the Johnston Senior Center.

Cold weather and shorter days can take a toll, especially during flu season. I encourage everyone to take simple steps to protect their health: dressing warmly, staying active, and reaching out if you need assistance.

The Senior Center offers a variety of exercise and wellness programs, including walking programs, yoga, Zumba, Fit & Strong classes, and regular blood pressure clinics. These programs are a good way to stay mobile, maintain balance, and remain socially connected during the winter months. Participation is encouraged at whatever pace feels comfortable for you.

## Senior Center Activities & Trips

Throughout January, February, and March, the Senior Center will continue to offer daily activities, crafts, and group programs, as well as scheduled trips and outings. These activities are designed to provide structure, social connection, and enjoyment during the winter season. Up-to-date schedules for activities and trips are available through the Senior Center and on the Johnston Senior Center website. If you have questions or would like help signing up, staff are always available to assist.

## Social Services & Tax Assistance

As tax season approaches, I want to remind residents that the Senior Center's Social Services Department is available to help with a wide range of needs, including:

- Medicare and health insurance guidance
- SNAP and other benefits assistance
- Housing and utility resources
- General support navigating services

In addition, AARP Tax Preparation services will be offered weekly beginning in February and continuing through April, by appointment. These free services are provided by trained volunteers and are a valuable resource for many seniors during tax season. **If you are unsure whether you qualify for assistance or need help scheduling an appointment, please reach out to the Senior Center directly.**

I remain grateful for the role you play in the Johnston community. Your experience, perspective, and steady presence continue to shape our town in meaningful ways. Please know that the Town of Johnston and the Senior Center staff are here to support you throughout the winter months.

Wishing you good health and a peaceful season.

Sincerely,

**Mayor Joseph M. Polisena, Jr.**



## Johnston Senior Center connects members with Senior Companions

Sometimes it is a ride to the pharmacy, and other times, it is simply a conversation over a cup of coffee.

That is the role of a Senior Companion, a volunteer program within the R.I. Office of Healthy Aging, that works in collaboration with the Johnston Senior Center to pair active seniors in the town with older adults that aren't independent or mobile, to provide companionship and assistance. Volunteers spend a few hours a week transporting their companion to medical appointments, shopping, or just visiting.

"I like to think of it as a friendship program," said Jenny Mercado, Senior Companion program director.

In addition to needing assistance, loneliness is one of the main reasons why homebound older adults request companion services, Mercado said. They may live alone after losing a spouse, have children who work full-time or live out-of-state, or have outlived friends and relatives.

"Jenny Mercado and the Johnston Senior Center are showing what this program does best—reduce isolation through consistent, human



(L-R) Ana Quezada, social services director at the Johnston Senior Center, volunteer Linda Maynard, and Jenny Mercado, R.I. Senior Volunteer program director, discuss applications for new volunteers.

connection. It's about meaningful togetherness and shared humanity," said Steven Boudreau, director of Equity and Engagement for the R.I. Office of Healthy Aging.

Senior Companions must meet eligibility requirements, such as having a valid driver's license, a vehicle with insurance, and a BCI check. Depending on income level, some volunteers may receive a stipend or mileage reimbursement.

"We want to be the conduit to connect

quilts that will provide comfort and warmth to those in need.

Each quilt is embroidered with the words The Giving Quilt Club as a subtle reminder of the true meaning of the season of giving.

The Quilting Club was organized by longtime friends Mary Lanzi and Fran Zanni in 2009 who made it their mission to help the community using their sewing skills, starting with baby quilts for a local children's home and expanding the donations to larger quilts whenever a club member heard of a place in need of items for people recovering from illness or trauma.

"I like the idea of keeping everybody warm," Zanni said.

Lanzi, who has been quilting for more than 40 years, said that quilting is "like putting together a puzzle with fabric."

The club keeps notebooks with photos of all the quilts and recipients. Among the themed entries are red, white and blue patterns for veterans, soft colors for children, animal patterns and matching fabrics.

"These quilts are a labor of love and represent the true spirit of giving," said Richard J. DeFino Jr., executive director of the Johnston Senior Center.

Johnston Senior Center's Quilting Club donates about 60 handmade quilts to nursing homes, hospitals, churches and service organizations around the state.

companions to seniors in the town who need these services. We have a dedicated person within the center for this purpose," said Richard J. DeFino, Jr., executive director of the Johnston Senior Center.

Currently, Diane Gray, Linda Maynard and Janice Hayward are the Senior Companions assigned to Johnston residents, but Machado said they need more.

"It is so fulfilling because they appreciate you so much," Maynard said.

Heywood added, "The women I help have filled a void for me and I help them as much as they help me."

All three Senior Companion volunteers agree that the friendships they have made through the program make it even more worthwhile.

**If interested in becoming a Senior Companion or for more information, contact Ana Quezada at the Johnston Senior Center at (401) 944-3343.**

## AN OPEN BOOK(CLUB)

In a quiet corner of the Johnston Senior Center is a cozy reading room where the center's book club gathers monthly. Organized by Mary Rawson with help from her sister, Barbara Kuras, the 23-member club meets the last Tuesday of the month, for book reviews, discussions, and "lots of laughs," said Kuras. Book selections are voted by the members. Local authors are also invited to join in the discussions and hold book signings. Though the club members read books of all genres, the favorite among the group seems to be the mysteries, said Rawson. Any member can borrow a book from a vast library or settle into a comfy recliner to read. Upcoming book selections are:

(January) **The Lost Roses**, by Martha Hall Kelly;  
(February) **James**, by Percival Everett;  
(March) **CHER, Part 1**, by Cher;  
(April) **The Engineer's Wife**, Tracey Enerson Wood.



Sisters Mary Rawson (L) and Barbara Kuras lead the monthly book club that meets at the center on the last Tuesday of the month.

## JSC's quilting club donates 60 quilts to those in need

There is a corner closet in the craft room of the Johnston Senior Center that is stacked with about 60 handmade quilts that are donated to hospitals, nursing homes, churches and charitable organizations throughout the state during the holiday season. This year's quilts were donated to Children's Friend and Service.

The quilts are the handiwork of the eight-member Johnston Senior Center's Quilting Club that meets every Tuesday to design, cut and sew fabric pieces that become the beautiful



The Quilting Club members are: (L-R) Fran Zanni, Suzanne Kabbaze, Connie Latour, Sue Franzen, Gina Fedele, Helen Lariviere, Marie Lanzi.



## IN THE NEWS | A pastoral visit

A near capacity crowd of over 200 people greeted His Excellency, The Most Rev. Bruce A. Lewandowski, bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Providence, on Thursday, Oct. 23, in a visit to the center to spread his message of spiritual healing, fellowship and faith.

The visit was requested Senior Center members, whose membership is largely Catholic.

The late Pope Francis named Lewandowski the 10th bishop of the Providence diocese in April 2025. Lewandowski came to Providence from the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Richard J. Delfino, Jr, executive director of the Senior Center, introduced the bishop by saying he awaited his expected arrival in a black SUV with a driver. Instead, the bishop drove himself in a rented vehicle with Florida license plates because his car was being repaired. Delfino also relayed a comical inquiry by a someone who



*The Most Rev. Bruce A. Lewandowski, bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Providence*

asked him when the pope was due to arrive in Rhode Island because it wasn't mentioned on the local news.

Mayor Joseph M. Polisena, Jr. gave a heartfelt greeting stressing the importance of faith and Johnston's observance of the National Day of Prayer each year.

The bishop dined with the center's members and invited guests and blessed rosary beads, crosses and rings for those who asked. His own pectoral cross was a gift from his family when he was named bishop and symbolizes his status as well as his connection to Christ and His Holy Cross.

Lewandowski said that meeting people is important to his ministry and mirrors what Christ did when He walked among the people.

"We're meeting Jesus in each other," he said.



*Master Chef Walter Potenza holding one of his cookbooks at the Johnston Senior Center on Dec. 4.*

## Chef Potenza serves up a taste of history

He has cooked for dignitaries, celebrities, a pope, Olympic athletes, and even prepared Elvis Presley's dinner after his final Rhode Island performance, but it is his passion for history and his Italian ancestry that has driven internationally renowned Master Chef Walter Potenza to share his knowledge as a scholar of his trade, as he did on Dec. 4 at the Johnston Senior Center, with a captivating presentation on the Italian migration to Rhode Island, and its lasting cultural, artistic and gastronomic impacts on the state and nation.

Over 100 people attended the event that included a full pasta lunch prepared by the Johnston Senior Center staff.

Potenza, a well-known Rhode Island restaurateur, culinary instructor and media personality, spoke of the early origins of Italian immigration in the 1860s, to its major wave from the 1880s to about 1914, bringing thousands to the state to work as laborers, tracing the journey of Italian immigrants, their struggles and triumphs, and the dawn of Italian-American influence, rich in tradition and old-world cuisine.

Born in the Guillianova region of Abruzzo, Italy, Potenza came to America at 19 to live with relatives in New York with the intent to play professional soccer. But his deep roots to his Italian culture led him to study culinary arts in Rhode Island and blend his love of food, history and storytelling.

Potenza's presentation touched on the transformation of Federal Hill, the evolution of Italian cooking into Rhode Island's kitchens, and Johnston's high percentage of residents claiming Italian ancestry, making it the second largest Italian community in the country.

He offered quips and anecdotes of the Italian matriarchal society, where he said that the "man had one job in the household and the woman had 13," and how the table became a celebration of culinary wealth for Italians perfectly represented by the Sunday meal.

"Italians live by their garden," he said, noting the use of seasonal fruits and vegetables in their everyday cooking.

He explained that the Christmas Eve feast of the seven fishes is not a true Italian concept, but rather an iteration of eating leaner foods during Advent.

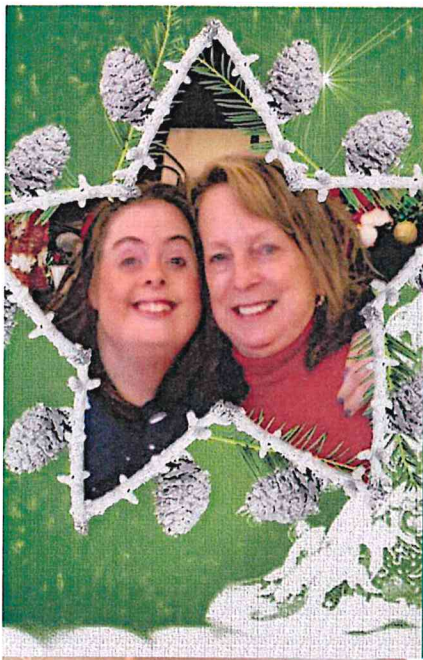
And, of course, he offered recipe tips.

"Breadcrumbs do not belong in meatballs," he professed. "Only the inside of bread soaked in milk is used."

Italians don't ingest garlic, he said, it is only for cooking. Also, use only San Marzano tomatoes and do not use sugar in the sauce.

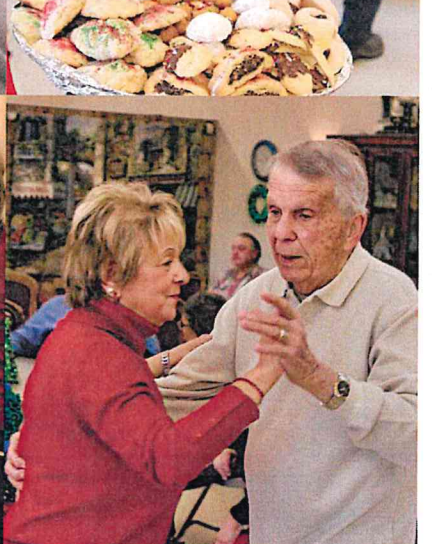
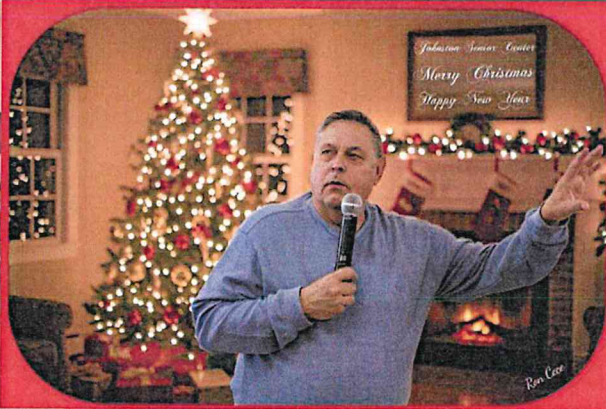
And a friendly reminder: Non toccare (don't touch). "If you go to Italy, don't touch the fruit." It is not allowed in Italian markets.





# Holiday Celebrations

The Johnston Senior Center celebrated the holiday season in style, kicking off with a Thanksgiving luncheon on Nov. 20 that included music from Eddie the Fixer, raffle prizes, and of course, a traditional turkey dinner. The festivities continued when the center honored its nearly 75 volunteers with a holiday luncheon on Dec. 11 in appreciation of their time and efforts in serving older adults in the community. The luncheon, catered by Luigi's restaurant, was served to the volunteers by the center's staff members. Music was provided by Duo Signore. Volunteers at the center serve in many different capacities, including lunch servers, bingo callers, café clerks, receptionists, van drivers, and senior companions. On Dec. 18, about 300 members attended the annual holiday party. Partiers dined on a special holiday meal, enjoyed music by Steve Anthony, and won an array of raffle prizes donated by various local organizations. Even Santa made a special visit to the center before the big night. In true holiday spirit, Dimeo Construction Company's Charitable Fund donated full Thanksgiving meal baskets for distribution to needy families in the community, and wellness gift bags containing a variety of personal care items for older adults in need.









The Place For Active Living and Healthy Aging



1291 Hartford Avenue  
Johnston, RI 02919

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## SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

### We're going digital!

Starting in Spring 2026, the newsletter  
will be available:

- On the website at [www.jscri.org](http://www.jscri.org)
- Via email
- Printed copies at the front desk

The Johnston Senior Center will celebrate its  
20th year at the Hartford Avenue location in 2026.  
Look for special events to commemorate the occasion.

**RVR** ROBERT V. RUSSO  
LAW OFFICES LLC

**ROBERT V. RUSSO, ESQ.**  
Attorney at Law

**401-777-0000**

Cell 401-374-9733 | [Robert@RobertRussoLawOffice.com](mailto:Robert@RobertRussoLawOffice.com)

1011 Smith Street, Floors 1-3, Providence, RI 02908

Jacqueline M.  
Grasso, Esq.

JACQUELINE GRASSO LAW OFFICE  
1310 Alwood Avenue  
Johnston, Rhode Island 02919  
(401) 946-4500; 401-946-4502 fax  
[www.grassolaw.net](http://www.grassolaw.net)

Jacqueline M. Grasso, Esq.  
Attorney at Law  
[jgrasso@grassolaw.net](mailto:jgrasso@grassolaw.net)



**Linda L. Folcarelli**

Johnston Town Council  
District 1

401-481-1247  
[councildist1folcarelli@gmail.com](mailto:councildist1folcarelli@gmail.com)

"Woodlawn"  
600 Pontiac Avenue  
Cranston RI 02910

- 401-421-0289 -  
[www.WoodlawnGattone.com](http://www.WoodlawnGattone.com)  
[woodlawnfri@gmail.com](mailto:woodlawnfri@gmail.com)

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