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TRIBUNE PHOTO: KYLE GREEN

Ihor Semko, 11 (front right), joins his dad, Ivan Semko (back right), for games with passers-by at Chess in the Park, held in Laurelwood Park on Southeast Foster Road.

Chess mates

No matter the accent, everyone bellies up to the chessboards on Foster Road

BY CONNIE PICKETT

The Tribune

Vasyl Savchyn sits at a folding table before a green and tan chessboard. The black-and-white pieces are all set up, just waiting for orders.

The retired Ukrainian immigrant and expert chess player breaks into a brilliant smile that lights up his lined, craggy face.

“Come, come,” he says with a thick accent, beckoning a passer-by to sit down at the table in Southeast Portland’s Laurelwood Park. “Come play chess.”

That’s about the sum total of Savchyn’s English, but it doesn’t matter. Chess is a game that transcends language, cultural, economic and neighborhood differences, a truism that’s about to be proved once again on a breezy Friday afternoon in the tiny park in the center of the Southeast Foster Road business district.

For years, the district has been thought of as a low-income area, crime-ridden and graffitied, not a place conducive to getting out of the car, strolling around and shopping.

Busy Southeast Foster Road serves as a diagonal shortcut from inner east Portland to the outer southeast, passing by a lot of nondescript, unappealing storefronts. The four lanes of heavy traffic are inhospitable to pedestrians.

But neighborhood leaders are working to reverse the trend with events like Chess in the Park, which continues every Friday through Aug. 30, and this

weekend's Foster Road Sidewalk Celebration.

"We've found that business districts and neighborhoods become more alive when people are out on the streets and walking around," says Sabrina Freewynn, community organizer for the Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Program.

"We've learned we have to slow traffic down and get motorists out of their cars to enjoy the neighborhood. Part of Chess in the Park is to do that."

Other projects in the works include storefront renovations, a traffic management plan and a business directory, showing both the diversity of the types of businesses as well as their owners, says Freewynn, who is assigned to the Foster Target Area Project, a community-driven program partially funded by the city to reinvigorate the business district.

It's already working, Freewynn says.

"Four years ago, there was not a single coffee shop on Foster," she says. "Now there are several. It's an indicator that you are getting foot traffic. Coffee shops don't survive otherwise."

Cultural gap narrows

One goal of the weekly chess event is to bridge the cultural gap between Portland's largest concentration of Eastern European immigrants and their English-speaking neighbors in the three neighborhoods — Foster-Powell, Mount Scott-Arleta and Creston-Kenilworth — surrounding the Southeast Foster Road business district.

"It's so much less intimidating to connect with somebody of a different language and culture across the chessboard," Freewynn says.

The brightly colored signs and balloons advertising Chess in the Park caught the attention of Bill Stouffer, a Creston-Kenilworth resident and chess fanatic who once was rated by the U.S. Chess Federation.

"This is a good way to bring the community together," he says.

Shortly after 4 p.m., Savchyn settles in for a match with Paul Moiceev, who moved to the Foster-Powell neighborhood six years ago. "I like the idea of these weekly games very much," says Moiceev, a computer technician.

He translates for Savchyn, who says he has been drumming up interest for the weekly chess event by passing out fliers to his chess buddies in Pioneer Courthouse Square.

While Savchyn and Moiceev play out their match, chess coordinators Zoe Piercey and Stephanie Rococho finish creating a street festival atmosphere with international flags and balloons strung in the park, which is squeezed into a tiny triangle-shaped grove of trees formed by the intersection of Southeast Foster Road and Holgate Boulevard near 64th Avenue.

Piercey invites local artists to sell their wares each Friday and also tries to book live music. "I have to be careful, though, that it doesn't interfere with the chess and the players' concentration," she says.

Rococho says Chess in the Park grew out of some festivals the community held last year. The city's Bureau of Housing and Community Development paid for the program with a \$3,240 grant.

Rococho was born in Ukraine, moved to the United States as a young adult, eventually became a citizen and moved to Portland in 1991. She and partner Leonid Nosov founded Cultural Expressions, an arts center on Southeast Foster Road dedicated to helping Portland's estimated 40,000 Eastern European immigrants preserve their art and culture.

Her business is among a dozen of the 200 Foster Road businesses owned by Eastern Europeans. Thirteen others are owned by people of other ethnic groups, including Hispanics and Asians.

Freewynn says the diversity only deepens the business potential of Foster

Road and is a point that the target-area project, entering its fifth year, likes to play up.

“We do tend to focus on the Eastern Europeans because there is nowhere else in Portland that you will find these businesses,” she says.

Foster-Powell resident Jeff Litwak says he and his wife, Gayle, like the diversity of business ownership in the neighborhood. They often drop by Restaurant Russia’s adjoining deli and the International Meat and Sausage Market. And he points out that a new tango dance studio, Tango Barretin, has opened around the corner from the park.

“Businesses here are understated and unrecognized,” he says.

Play runs to nightfall

It’s getting close to 6 p.m., and attendance is picking up right along with the rush hour traffic on Foster Road. Before the evening ends, about 60 people will filter through the park.

Rococha has asked Savchyn, a resident of Beaverton, and Ivan Semko of Sellwood to serve as the resident chess experts during the eight-week event.

The two men work the park, playing all comers.

“We’re also teachers,” Semko says haltingly. He speaks a little English, but his 11-year-old son, Ihor, stays nearby to help translate when needed.

But chess players don’t talk much, anyway. The game is their conversation.

Peter Pritchett stops by on his way home to Northeast Portland after visiting his ill mother at Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center. A passionate chess player who often competes at the Portland Chess Club, he saw the signs and just had to play.

He and Semko take a seat. As they play, Pritchett nods and Semko sways to the beat of the accordion music played by Rococha’s partner, Nosov.

Nearby, Moiceev has challenged Steve Ganz, owner of Ganz Piano Service. “I love chess, and it’s great to have it right across the street from my business,” says Ganz, who says he was rated “1,799th” by the U.S. Chess Federation many years ago.

As the sun sets over June’s His and Her Salon across from the park, Pritchett and Mike Jones of Southeast Portland are locked in a battle to the checkmate. It’s 8:10 p.m., and, technically, this edition of Chess in the Park should be over. But Jones and Pritchett, shivering in his short-sleeve polo shirt now that the sun has disappeared, play on.

Finally, at 8:50, they call it a draw, quickly shake hands and disappear into the dusk.

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