

Deanwood Chess House

Celebrating 10 Years of 'Chess-Focused' Living

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ



Eugene Brown, co-founder, Deanwood Chess House, Big Chair Chess Club, 4322 Sheriff Road NE.

“Where am I? What’s the best move to make in this position?”

Learning to focus on such questions is essential in chess, says Eugene Brown, co-founder of Big Chair Chess Club and Deanwood Chess House. And this can help people of all ages with decision-making beyond the chessboard.

“Chess is the game of life,” says club regular Bay Bay Brokenborough, who has been around since the club opened 10 years ago. “It tells you to do better in life ... make different choices.”

“It gives you peace of mind,” says fellow player Marques Glascoe, a more recent member. “And it doesn’t matter who wins. Even if you lose, you’ll learn something.”

On Saturdays, school-age players fill the club. But each Monday, Wednesday and Friday evening, players range in age from teens to 60s.

Some evenings, club manager Ricky Norman presents a famous game, which participants follow on a large board, calling out questions and occasional outrage:

“Why didn’t white take that pawn?”

“No way! Then the knight’ll take the bishop.”



◀ Team captain Reginald Lockett arranges a food run during a Wednesday night “chess happy hour.”

▶ Reggie Pearson (seated left) and Chesley Swann, members of the award-winning Big Chair Chess Club team, enjoy a challenge. Team captain Reginald Lockett (standing left) and club manager Ricky Norman oversee operations.



◀ Players contemplate their moves at Deanwood Chess House.

“Aw, he’s trippin’, man. Now he’s really in trouble!”

At times, Norman pauses the historical game – e.g., Bobby Fischer’s 1957 US Open win – to play out suggested alternatives until the consequences of a “better” move become apparent.

When the seminar ends, individual games begin. Play is quick, timers ticking at each table. Some opt for a relatively quiet game. Others engage in trash talk. The tension is friendly and the conversation lively. A volunteer goes for take-out. Alcohol is not part of the activities, and any cigarettes are smoked outside.

“It’s a place to wind down, when you get off work, talk politics, talk religion. ... Everybody respects everybody for what they are,” explains Brokenborough.

The Chess Connection

Glascoe and Brokenborough, who differ in age by decades, share

a cigarette break and wide-ranging conversation: “I caddied for Lee Elder,” Brokenborough offers. “He was Tiger Woods before Tiger Woods – the first professional black golfer ... right here at Langston.”

“History I didn’t know, along with the game!” Glascoe exclaims. “Being a younger dude, I can learn from older ones.”

Mentoring, in the game and beyond, is an important part of the club, members agree. So is networking. Finally, says Reggie Pearson, “There’s always that nerd factor.”

Pearson learned chess early but didn’t find opponents in the “nerdy” game until he saw the huge chess pieces over the club’s door. He is now a member of the award-winning team and spends club evenings enjoying the company and honing his game.

Pearson’s teammate, Chesley Swann, is the DC Chess League’s youngest player. Even though some

high school classmates play, and he has a computer game and chess books to challenge him at home, he participates in the club once or twice a week. "They really connect chess to life," Swann says. "It's just like the motto: they teach you to think before you move."

All Chess-Focused Life

Not every club participant hopes to be a master, as Swann does. But participants say chess is enjoyable at every level of play. And Brown believes chess is a life skill for all ages.

Chess may not seem like the ideal HIV-prevention strategy, for example, but awareness of risk is a key aspect of the game. Potential costs can be explored more safely on the 64-square board than on the streets. And adult leaders challenge youth to stay "chess-focused" outside the club.

"Unprotected sex puts you and your partner at risk, so protect your pieces," Brown offers. "If you're riding in a stolen car, it's time to say, 'OK, this is not a good move. Let me out.' ... And if you don't know the next move, you need to be around some people who do."

"You're going to be challenged all through life," says Brown, who learned to play chess during a prison stint many years ago. "Chess taught me to foresee a lot of trouble – when to say, 'This is not the move I want to make.'" He credits his chess mentor with teaching him to stop blaming others and accept responsibility for choices: "The king is the thinker on the board, and you – male or female – you're the king."

Brown, team captain Reginald Luckett and others teach "piece identification" – knowing bishop from rook, bank manager from teller and principal from secretary – and chess vocabulary. "Once they've learned what a 'gambit' is, you can't give my kids nothing for free, because they know there's something behind it," Brown proudly proclaims.

All Are Welcome

It's important for young people to learn such lessons "from men who

are doing the right thing, from men they respect," says Donna Perry, Swann's mother. Male mentoring is an important aspect of the club, she believes. On the other hand, the absence of females, especially African-Americans, in the chess world concerns Perry.

Several players immediately cite Judit Polgar (grandmaster at age 15) and other female players. Brown led an elementary school girls team for several years and encourages girls and women to participate at Deanwood Chess House.

"All are welcome," several club members stress. And taking care of one another – making sure that everyone has a ride home, for example – is part of the club culture.

"We take care of our own," Brokenborough explains. "And if some checker players come by, we'll take care of them, too!"

"The club is a great asset," says Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander, noting mentorship and the team's national awards. It's an example, she adds, "that you don't need government money to succeed." Brown, a real estate agent, bought the historic house and often digs into his own pocket for club operations. Funding cuts meant the end of an after-school program, however, and he says community needs are growing in the recession.

For the club's second decade, Brown would like to open the house for more community service by adding programming for ex-offenders and supporting the Greater Deanwood Heritage Trail by making the house (stop #12) a welcome center for guided tours.

Deanwood Chess House, 4322 Sheriff Road NE. Call 202-396-1780 or e-mail chess@bigchairchessclub.org for more information. An anniversary/Black History Month event is scheduled for Feb. 27, 1-4 p.m. See the Bulletin Board in this paper for more information about the event.



IS YOUR CHILD SAFE in Your Kitchen?

Fires and burns are the third leading cause of accidental injury-related death among children ages 1 to 14. And the kitchen is one of the most common places for burn accidents to happen.

Keep kids safe and burn-free with these tips:

- Create a safe zone for toddlers when cooking. Put your child in a playpen or high chair, so children won't wander into the cooking area.
- Never hold a baby when cooking or carrying hot items.
- Never microwave a baby bottle.
- Cook with pots and pans on back burners to keep them out of your child's reach.
- Place hot liquids and foods in the center of the table.

For more tips on keeping kids safe and burn-free, visit

www.ChildrensNational.org/BurnSafety.



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