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Contact: Jim Flaherty, Communications Director

Office 608/ 286-6308 – Cell 608/ 698-0928, jflaherty@aarpp.org

‘Uke It Up Beloit’ proposal wins AARP WI’s Small Dollar, Big Impact grant

BELOIT, WI – “Uke It Up Beloit,” a new program offered by the City of Beloit’s Grinnell Hall Senior Center to bring people together to learn the ukulele and share generational stories has been selected to receive this month’s AARP Wisconsin “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant.

The \$1,000 grant will cover the cost of purchasing 16 ukuleles and providing lessons for Beloit-area residents of all ages who will learn the instrument together and give a community performance once their training is complete.

AARP Wisconsin is awarding grants each month throughout 2024 to projects across the state that are designed to improve communities and make them better places for everyone to live, work and play as they age. Judges selected this project after reviewing dozens of proposals submitted from all over the state.

“It goes without saying that music has a profound impact on our lives,” said Darrin Wasniewski, Associate State Director of Community Outreach for AARP Wisconsin. “Bringing people together to learn how to play a musical instrument while bonding and sharing their lifetime of experiences is exactly what this grant program is all about. It’s engaging the community to create community.”

Debbie Kraus, manager of the Grinnell Hall Senior Center, 631 Bluff St., Beloit, said, “The use of music helps promote wellness, enhance memory, improve communications, express feelings, and more. Grinnell Hall currently works with Youth Unite, a nonprofit organization offering a drum and music circle once a month, and you can see the smiling faces and how music makes an individual feel.”

The budget for “Uke It Up Beloit” will include the purchase of ukuleles, the cost

of lessons, and all the performance expenses, which Kraus says adds up to about \$1,180. The grant will cover most of that cost, with the senior center picking up the remaining \$180. The lessons will be available to all ages.

“We want to bring generations together with ukulele lessons offered by Youth Unite for youth and seniors. Participants will receive a ukulele and have lessons for six weeks,” Kraus said. “We hope to have the lessons together if possible. At the end of the six weeks, participants will come together for a performance at Grinnell Hall.”

“Uke it up Beloit” is a 6-week ukulele class that is open to individuals of all ages and skills. All generations will learn together. Individuals will receive a ukulele to use during the lessons and to keep if interested in continuing to play. Classes will be held at Grinnell Hall Senior Center from 6 to 7 p.m. on Tuesdays starting on Aug. 27 and running through Oct. 1. The performance will be at 6 p.m. on Oct. 8.

Instructor Johnny Wittnebel has been teaching music in the Beloit area for 10 years. He is a co-founder of The Youth Unite, a non-profit organization that aims to enhance people through music, the arts, and education. He is well known for his musical ability and teaching skills. The class is open to students of all ages! Please register in advance by calling Grinnell Hall at 608-364-2875.

In addition to the 16 ukes the senior center is purchasing, Kraus said anyone who already owns their own uke is also welcome to bring it and join in the lessons.

“We really appreciate this Small Dollar, Big Impact grant. AARP is a great resource for older adults and family members who are caring for older adults,” Kraus said. “Uke It Up Beloit will connect generations and bring together older adults, their children, their grandchildren, and anyone else who wants to learn the ukulele. We want everyone to learn and play together.”

Grinnell Hall Memorial Hall was built for Veterans in memory of William H. Grinnell and opened in 1937. In 1977, Veterans groups worked with the City of Beloit to purchase the hall, which continues to offer services and activities to older adults, while still serving veterans.

AARP Wisconsin’s launched its “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant program in 2020 and is now in its fifth year of helping proposed projects move forward in rural and urban parts of the state. For more information, visit www.aarp.org/WIsdbi

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