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## Dinner, drinks, debate: Science Café draws curious crowd

CAROLINE EGGERS [ceggers@bgdailynews.com](mailto:ceggers@bgdailynews.com) 1 hr ago



Jean Neils-Strunjas.

Contributed.

Several dozen people packed into clustered tables Monday at 6-4-3 Sports Bar and Grill to discuss a puzzling aspect of human aging – memory – during Science Café, a monthly gathering of individuals eager to learn and connect with other science enthusiasts.

Jean Neils-Strunjas, a Western Kentucky University professor and co-founder of the Center for Applied Science in Health and Aging, led the casual lecture.

Neils-Strunjas explained the various types of memory: short term and long term, which can be divided further into categories such as implicit vs. explicit, declarative vs. procedural and semantic vs. episodic.

While talking, she weaved among the tables, asked questions to the audience and enlisted volunteers – she had a guest pretend to serve a tennis ball with a racket to demonstrate an implicit, unconscious memory.

Neils-Strunjas also explained the bigger picture and why studying memory is so important.

Since the human brain is plastic – not like the stuff clogging our stormwater drains or oceans, but in the malleable sense – it can improve.

“I do think there are ways to maximize our use of memory,” Neils-Strunjas said, such as through physical activity. “Exercise is extremely important to keep your memory. It’s one of the main things you can do to maintain cognitive power.”

Michael Carini, a WKU professor of physics and astronomy, introduced the event Monday in place of his colleague, Richard Gelderman, the Science Café organizer and fellow WKU professor.

Carini regularly attends the events, and finds that the topics can be satisfying for both the casual science enthusiast and technical scientists wanting to learn outside their specialties.

“We try to keep it about science, but all the ways science impacts life,” he said. “The tone of the talk is big picture.”

The Science Café topics have ranged from astronomy and voter polling to Corvettes and caves. Each conversation is steered by an expert, and “they’re all unique,” Carini said.

Though open to the public, certain topics might speak to certain demographics. When asked how many members of the audience were 65 or older, about three-quarters of this month's group raised their hands.

Mike Warner and Kim Warner, both of Bowling Green, attended their first Science Café together Monday.

“They’re really great topics,” Mike Warner said. “People want to learn more,” and the event provided a convenient opportunity to do so.



Kim Warner, a speech language pathologist, might have had a little too much expertise on the topic of aging and memory for this particular event, but she enjoyed the experience nonetheless and expressed interest in future gatherings.

“I’d like to come to more,” she said.

Thomas Napier, who teaches science at Butler County Middle School, attended his third Science Café.

“I could probably research this online, but it’s nice to get a personal touch,” Napier said. “It encourages audience participation. I like that interaction.”

Napier also appreciated the accessibility of the science conversations.

“They don’t want it to be highbrow,” he said.

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## Caroline Eggers

News reporter.

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