In South Jersey, bingo is more than just a game

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A steady stream of people filed into the St. Gianna Family Memorial Center in Northfield on a recent Wednesday morning. The mood was somewhere between that of a church event and family picnic.

The crowd of about 70 was ready to play bingo at the center behind St. Gianna Beretta Molla Parish.

“We just have our friends right here,” said Judy Saggiomo, of Brigantine, pointing to her group. “We come here to socialize.”

St. Gianna’s bingo has a progressive jackpot that increases until it’s won. As the weeks go on, the chance of winning increases because so many numbers will have been called. That could mean a win of more than $5,000, which has happened in the past.

This bingo game was in its early stages of the progressive jackpot, which meant a jackpot of about $875, so the crowd was mostly of regulars.

Setting up next to Saggiomo was Diane and George Giangeruso, of Brigantine, coffee and breakfast items sitting between them.

The concession stand is equipped to provide the first meal of the day.

“This is the best bingo around,” George Giangeruso said. “We win every once in awhile.”

The tight-knit group sits in the same area together each week.

“If someone doesn't show up, we call them or text in our group,” Diane Giangeruso said.

John Murphy, owner of Mainland Bingo since 1982, said he’s seeing a renewed interest in the game in all generations.

“It's not your grandma's game anymore,” Murphy said. “There’s a lot of younger people now. They come from Camden, Toms River — word gets out about the high jackpots.”

Trendy handbag-bingo games also are popping up in South Jersey.

Glittery sweaters and over-the-knee boots filed Feb. 10 into the gymnasium at St. Ann's Early Education Center to play for designer handbags with the added benefit of raising funds for upcoming post-prom events.

Twenty Kate Spade and Michael Kors handbags lined the stage. In a range of sizes and styles, each covetable bag was from a recent line.

The sea of women brought bottles of wine and desserts to go along with the concession stand the school offered.

Most players were local, and some attend other area bingos, but many were visiting a girlfriend’s beach house for the weekend, and the event fit the bill.

“It’s a fun girls’ night,” said Jusy Iannella, of Eagleville, Pennsylvania, who was visiting for the weekend.

“I think we get more dressed up,” said Amber Hennessey, of North Wildwood.
The first winner of a new navy-and-white striped Kate Spade tote was Casey Liberman, 20, who was visiting with college roommates from Pennsylvania.

The group of morning bingo players at St. Gianna’s each set out about 20 cards in preparation for the game. Most players trickle in as early as two hours prior to the game to set up their cards, grab a bite to eat and socialize.

The St. Gianna bingo has been going on for 37 years, and some of the players have been loyal to the game for as long.

Troll dolls and elephants large and small in a rainbow of colors began to line tables. Players hope to channel luck from their trinkets to their bingo cards.

Dozens of upright Dabbin’ Fever markers lined tables after being taken out of personalized bingo caddies and cases.

The “fever” part seemed accurate as George Hornburger, the caller, began the game. Bingo balls popped out of the twirling basket and the bingo board at the head of the gymnasium began to light up.


A hush over the crowd was replaced by a furious dabbing of markers.

One clue that exposed the crowd as regulars was they weren’t fazed by the fast-paced calling of numbers. Most could continue a hushed conversation and dot all of their boards, constantly scanning the cards, blotting out their boards with a cloud of pink, blue and purple ink.

Finally, a hand shot up.

“Bingo!”

The crowd clapped and returned to its rowdy state while the floor workers verified the win.

“We have people handling pull-tabs, cash boxes, a 50/50 raffle, the concession stand and floor workers to verify wins,” said coordinator Nancy Norton.

Most of the volunteers are St. Gianna parishioners, but the players come from all over South Jersey.

“It’s a 10-week cycle. A lot of people chase the numbers and show up at the end when there is a large jackpot, but most everyone here is a regular. They come early because they know each other, and it’s an upbeat atmosphere.”

She said when someone wins, the whole gymnasium — usually from 70 to 160 people — applauds.

She said part their bingo’s success has been the time. At 10 a.m., older players can avoid driving in the dark.

Angela Moses, of Ventnor Heights, appreciates that.

She also goes to bingo at Mainland Bingo in Pleasantville — the other South Jersey bingo hotspot with a progressive jackpot. Mainland is open seven nights a week and has 11 a.m. bingo on Fridays and 1 p.m. bingo on the weekends.

But Moses covets her Wednesday morning excursions to St. Gianna’s, where her daughter drops her off on her way to work. She said when it comes to bingo, she finds a way to get there.

“You have all kinds of people here,” Moses said. “Everyone is so nice here. They’re just good people.”

Iris Wynder drives from Bridgeton for St. Gianna’s games and has been doing it for years.

“Bingo is my thing. Bingo is the thing for a lot of people,” she said.
She was organizing eight early-bird games, six 50/50 games and eight progressive games. Despite dozens of
numbers and letters being spread out before her, she said keeping track of the numbers being called isn't
hard.

“I'm used to it.”

Wynder also makes the drive for Mainland Bingo games on occasion, saying it's popular for its every day
games.

At the table next door, friend Dana Dixon, of Vineland, who has been coming to St. Gianna's for about a year,
was setting up knick-knacks before the game.

“Elephants are good luck,” she said.

For many South Jersey residents, bingo culture isn't just about a game.

“I've had surgeries — a hip replacement,” Louise Andreacia said. “They know my name here and sent get-well
cards,” she said of the volunteers at St. Gianna's. “They thought about me when I wasn't here.”