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Building community one Mahjong tile at a time

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Lisa Kender (second from left) of Blacksburg Newcomers Club teaches (left to right) Jessica Nguyen, Doniel Kaye, Jerr Xie and Jayce Lee how to play Mahjong at Hillel at Virginia Tech. Kender said she learned to play the game while living in

Photos by Michael Shroyer | Special to The Roanoke Times

Correction

Thursday, March 19, 2020, 11:10 a.m.: Nina Ha is director of Virginia Tech's Asian Cultural Engagement Center. An earlier version of this story contained an incorrect title. The story has been updated.

BLACKSBURG — “Ahh! I got Mahjong!”

Jaclyn Marmol smiled and raised her arms over her head in celebration. It was the first time the Virginia Tech senior political science major had played the popular strategic tile game imported to the U.S. from China in the 1920s.

And she won — with help from the Blacksburg Newcomers Club Mahjong group, which had a teacher at each table. About 30 members of the club meet regularly to play the game, organizer Jennifer House said.

At tables set up around the student lounge at Hillel at Virginia Tech on Toms Creek Road, other new players were learning, too. And some were having the same success.

Marmol was one of about a dozen members of Tech's Asian American Student Union to attend the event, which was hosted by Hillel and organized by the Jewish Student Union.

It is one of several events the JSU has organized with other student groups in the wake of a string of anti-Semitic attacks across the country, JSU President Jackson Ribler said.

“This year we have been working to build on those relationships in times of sharing and happiness as well,” Ribler wrote in an email. “We co-hosted a Hanukkah get together with HokiePRIDE [and] are planning an event with the Muslim Student Union next year.”

Other events with the Asian American student group are also on the calendar.

“The relationship with AASU is especially important — our two cultures share so much in terms of values and history,” Ribler wrote. “Mahjong became a staple of Jewish life as Jews fled Europe and Russia for Shanghai over the decades. There has long been a Jewish presence in Asia with the Cochin and Kaifeng Jews.”

Jewish players have had a big influence on American Mahjong, too, and helped develop the game here. House, who is not Jewish, said when she arrived in Blacksburg in 2018 she was surprised to find no organized Mahjong games. So she started one as part of the Newcomers Club.

“Once you get playing, it’s very addictive,” House said.





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At another table, Newcomers Club co-President Lisa Kender was instructing a group of Asian American students on how to play the Chinese version of the game. Kender said she learned while living part-time in China over two summers.

“In China it’s a very intense game,” Kender said.

Nina Ha, director of of Virginia Tech's Asian Cultural Engagement Center, said she remembers when she was growing up in Boston, her father took it very seriously because he bet on the outcome.

Ha recalled going to bed at night while they were playing, waking up the next morning with the game still in progress. But she never learned to play herself.

“It’s ironic,” Ha said. “None of our students know how to play it, really.”

Most of the Jewish students were new to the game, too, or had played infrequently when they were younger.

Psychology graduate student Tanya Mitropoulos said she played when she was 13-years-old, but not since then.

The Newcomers Club has moved its regular game from House’s residence to Hillel’s Malcolm Rosenberg Center.

“Hopefully we’ll get kids interested,” House said. “And we’ll be able to teach kids.”

The group plays from 1:30-3:30 p.m. on the first Monday of the month. Beginners are welcome.

For more information, visit <https://blacksburgnewcomer.wixsite.com/bbnc/mahjungg>.

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