

2026 BLAST! Program

Subject to change

Friday January 23, 2026

NNJ French Conversation Group –

Kathleen Stein-Smith, PhD

A dedicated foreign language educator and advocate, Dr. Smith serves as Chair of the AATF (American Association of Teachers of French) Commission on Advocacy. She is an America's Languages Fellow and a member of the American Translators Association's Education and Pedagogy Committee and the Modern Language Association Delegate Assembly. The French Republic has named her an *officier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques*. She is also active in foreign language education associations, including serving on the Advisory Council of the Northeast and Central States Conferences of Teachers of Foreign Languages (NECTFL and CSCTFL) and as a sponsor of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT). She has presented at numerous professional conferences at the state, regional, and national level, is the author of nine books and numerous articles about the foreign language deficit and the importance of multilingualism, has given a TEDx talk on the U.S. foreign language deficit, has been interviewed by press and radio, and maintains a blog, "Language Matters"

<https://kathleensteinsmith.wordpress.com>. She earned a Baccalauréat spécialisé and Maîtrise in Québec, where her master's thesis on the comparative stylistics of French and English was written under the direction of Jean-Louis Darbelnet. If you would like to maintain or improve your French language skills, please consider joining us on Monday evenings for the weekly NNJ Mensa French conversation group online via zoom, Mondays at 7 PM.

Happy Hour and Humorous Hats — Dining Area – 7:30 to 9:00 PM (21+ only)

Description: Come join in this wonderful tradition. Our bartender will be mixing drinks and serving up laughs. Wear your most humorous headgear (optional but encouraged) and join us for the happiest hour (and change) at BLAST!

Mensa Literacy Campaign –

Laurie Thomas

Description: Mississippi went from having the worst public elementary schools in the nation to among the best, by embracing the science of reading. Northern New Jersey Mensa wants to help the underperforming schools in our region achieve similar (or better!) success. Learn about the materials that we are sharing with the public, and how you can take part in our literacy campaign.

Cybersecurity in age of organized crime hacks using AI-

Carl J. Mazzanti

Description: Global organized crime organizations are increasingly using AI to hack accounts and run various scams. IT expert Carl Mazzanti will give you important insights about cybersecurity for your business and yourself.

Wine Tasting – To Be Confirmed

Description: Join us on a guided tasting of unique grape varietals you likely have not heard of but should get to know. Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Sauvignon Blanc, and Merlot all make some delicious wines. And you probably love at least one of these grapes, but we will NOT be tasting any of them. Why? Because we're Mensans and we can appreciate a greater spectrum of anything. To that end, we're going to explore some unique varietals that I promise will become a new favorite, or remind you of a wine you already love, or re-introduce you to something you tried that one time on that great trip, or all of the above. Sit back, let me pour you something delicious, share some fun facts, and expand your wine palate and knowledge.

Saturday January 24, 2026

Meet NNJM leadership –

Greg Hoffman & Members of the Excomm

Description: Meet with our NNJM Leadership Team and look at the 2025 achievements as well as the 2026 plan. See why our Chapter has won the Diamond award every year for the past four years and why we are in a good position to win a fifth. This is a great opportunity to see how the chapter is run and how the coordination happens. It is also a perfect time to provide your feedback, explore your potential support to the chapter, or share your ideas.

Mensa admission test session – Business Center – 9:30 AM 12:00 noon

Richard Schaeffer

Testing session for candidates who hope to join Mensa. Please do not disturb—thank you!

Are you interested in becoming a proctor in the NNJM Chapter? Please meet with Richard!

Chair Yoga –

Laurie Thomas

Description: See how a disabled vet lost more than 100 pounds, along with his disability, through a yoga program. Learn about how yoga can help to rebuild your bones and help you remain independent. DDP Yoga is designed to meet you wherever you are: whether you are bedridden, able only to sit up in a chair, or an elite athlete who wants a competitive edge. We will do a chair yoga workout.

Calculating your Retirement Number: How to determine EXACTLY how much you will need to retire

Keith Thompson

Keith currently works as a senior business development strategist for the global leader in AI and cloud services and was formerly head of financial planning & analysis for a large multinational air transportation corporation. Among his many accomplishments, he currently manages a hedge fund focused on macro-strategy investing. He possesses multiple graduate degrees in economics and finance.

Have you ever heard of the 4% rule in retirement? What about the 5% rule? Will you need \$1M, or \$2M, or some other multiple of that to comfortably retire? When should you start collecting Social Security to maximize its value to you? Will it even be there when you retire, and should that affect your decision when to start collecting from it? How much will I need to retire in some comfort? When should you start saving for retirement? What are the five essential questions to answer before you retire? Come and learn answers to all these and more questions related to this important topic of retirement.

Meet the AMC –

Jon Gruebele and other Members of the AMC

Jon is the Chair of the American Mensa Committee (AMC), which is the board of directors of American Mensa, Ltd. (AML). He previously served as the first and second vice chair of the AMC and before that as the regional vice chair (board representative) for Region 4 (North Central Region) of American Mensa. He's a former LocSec, longtime proctor, and a Life Member. Jon has co-chaired Chicago Area Mensa's "A Gathering of Gamers" (AGOG) Regional Gathering and has chaired and participated as a member on

various national Committees. His background is in international marketing, IT, and management for a Fortune 100 company. He is a process and quality improvement expert.

Description: American Mensa Committee (AMC) members attending BLAST! will moderate a discussion about issues facing the organization. We'll be happy to entertain your questions, comments, ideas, complaints, suggestions, challenges, and whatever else you'd like to address. The discussion is always interesting – please join us!

Introducing Quantum Computing: How it would change your life in the coming decades

Tanvi Gopalan

Tanvi Gopalan is a 12-year-old Young Mensan and a Youth Science Communicator demystifying the world of quantum physics for audiences of all ages. Tanvi hosts the podcast "Quantum Physics for Kids by Subatomic Tanvi", turning complicated ideas into simple, engaging talks. She is also the Ambassador for New York and New Jersey at "Girls in Quantum" (an organization devoted to inspiring and empowering girls globally by enabling them on quantum science) and was a featured Keynote Speaker at the Q-Volution 2025 conference. Tanvi's message is that the amazing world of quantum science is never too big or confusing for any curious mind.

Masterminding Your Personal and Professional Development by unlocking the Four Dimensions of Success

Keith Thompson

Keith is member of Northern New Jersey Mensa's executive committee and currently works as a senior business development strategist for the global leader in AI and cloud services. Among his many accomplishments, he's a former strategy consultant who helped develop corporate strategy initiatives for large and small corporations and presented this personal development seminar to numerous groups and individuals. He's a former adjunct professor in economics and finance and has multiple graduate degrees.

Description: What are the Four Dimensions of Success, and how can you utilize them to achieve personal growth and development? What should you do to grow your career and achieve professional growth by operating on these four dimensions?

Masterminding your Personal & Professional Development will focus on achieving three goals, namely helping you to 1/ identify then exploit your Development Curve, 2/ develop a Strategic Plan for long-term success, and 3/ compete on a Higher Dimension. This will be a personal growth session, so come prepared.

Legal Negotiations –

William Wallis, Esq.

William is an associate in the law firm of Sacco & Fillas, LLP. He practices in the personal injury group, representing clients who have been injured in accidents, such as motor vehicle accidents, pedestrian knockdowns, and premise cases involving slip and falls. Prior to joining Sacco & Fillas, William developed a diversified background in employment, criminal defense, and advocacy pursuant to the Child Victims Act. Prior to practicing law, William was appointed chief of staff to a ranking member of the Florida House of Representatives, where he worked closely with his state representative to draft, promote, and successfully pass into law statewide legislation.

William is licensed in both New York and New Jersey, focusing his practice at Sacco & Fillas, LLP exclusively on unyielding advocacy for those who were injured because of the negligence of others. William brings his broad experience of advocacy for injured victims in a variety of facets of the law to the firm and to his clients. William's clients appreciate the time he spends with them along the way, allowing for greater understanding of their case and, ultimately, a more satisfactory experience. He is an invaluable asset to the firm and its clients, for whom he zealously advocates at each stage of the case, from inception through and including trial.

Ask the Gemologist –

Joseph Haber

Description: Joe will give a brief discussion of practical gemology. He will describe how just three simple and inexpensive instruments (the hand loupe, the dichroscope, and the Chelsea filter) can be used to identify approximately 95% of commonly encountered gems.

Joseph Haber is a graduate gemologist from the Gemological Institute of America (GIA). He is the president of Middle Earth Treasures, a business that sells gems, jewelry, and crystals. Joe has been intimately involved in the gem and jewelry trade for over 40 years. Joe has taught and assisted in teaching gem identification classes. He is a passionate collector of minerals.

Learning, Communicating, and Excelling in a Neurodiverse World –

Jenny Liu, Julissa Cadenillas, Jared Kornblatt, and Peter Flom

Description: Have you or your family ever felt misunderstood, different, or unable to fit in? In today's [neurodiverse world](#), one observation holds true: individuals think, learn, and communicate differently. These behaviors can create challenges when navigating institutional and social norms. Many of those norms neither account for nor accommodate neuroatypical learning and communication styles, ranging from differences in attention regulation to literalism with an aversion to "small talk."

When others require pleasantries for connection, neurodivergent individuals may struggle to reconcile differences with neurotypical peers. This dynamic – cloaked in normative language and unspoken etiquette across educational, social, and professional settings – can become problematic for children and adults. Neurodivergent traits may be misinterpreted as stubbornness, perfectionism, or rudeness, rather than understood as differences in cognition and communication.

This panel discussion seeks to engage, educate, and elevate the audience's understanding of neurodiversity by sharing three distinct and yet complementary perspectives. Together, they aim to surface these challenges, examine their real-world consequences, and help the audience understand how to better work with each other.

Dance Lessons for Dance-Impaired Mensans –

Don Jacobs

Description: Oh, that smooth and romantic movement of Fred and Ginger. Well, stop dreaming about it and do something. That's right... YOU! Learn the art of ballroom dancing from Mensa's own guru of dance. Whether it's foxtrot or swing, waltz or tango, you'll be a better dancer by the time you leave and maybe even a smarter one. Ballroom dancing is definitely back, and this class is a must. It also comes with a 30/30 guarantee. For details, come to the class.

Taylor Swift fans will be pleased to know that Don was the dance consultant for her Taylor's Blank Space music video. Don has also been performing for many years now. His credits include performances on A&E, PBS, QVC and AMC. He has also performed in the grand ballrooms of the Waldorf Astoria, Lincoln Center,

and The Rainbow Room. As an independent instructor, Don has been teaching for nearly 30 years, both private individual and group classes locally as well as for many years on cruise ships and at conventions.

The US Supreme Court in 2025: Key Decisions and What Comes Next –

Gregory Hoffman, Esq.

Greg is an associate at Lindabury, McCormick, Estabrook & Cooper, P.C. and a member of the firm's Litigation and Real Estate groups. With extensive experience in civil litigation, he represents clients in a wide range of disputes, consistently achieving favorable outcomes. Greg's practice spans commercial litigation, insurance defense, and real estate matters.

In addition to his litigation experience, Greg currently serves as Council President for the Borough of Park Ridge, New Jersey, where he serves on the municipal planning board, is the liaison for the Taxpayers for Aircraft Noise Solutions Committee (TANS), and liaison for the Recreation and Culture Committee. This role enhances his capability to represent clients before municipal planning and zoning boards, navigating the complexities of real estate approvals for developments, variances, and site plans.

Greg holds a J.D. from Rutgers Law School, where he served as Vice President of the Student Bar Association and President of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Society. He is admitted to practice in New Jersey and is actively involved in professional bar associations, including the New Jersey State Bar Association and the Bergen County Bar Association. He has also served as LocSec for Northern New Jersey Mensa.

Group Picture – Dining Room – 6 to 6:30 PM

Immediately before dinner, we'll be taking a group photo in the dining room. Don't miss it! 😊

Punctilious Punctuation: Telling tales with (and of) those jots and tittles, including why they're called jots and tittles, and the horrifying story of why the period goes inside the quotation marks

Ian Randal Strock

Description: Humans have a wonderful ability to miscommunicate with language. And as confusing as all those words are, they would be much, much harder to understand if it weren't for the punctuation we use to divide, group, emphasize, and combine them. Texting and newspapers' space-saving attempts may be responsible for turning punctuation into a dying art form, but Ian Randal Strock posits that punctuation is necessary, beautiful, evocative, meaningful... and a heck of a lot of fun. Come listen to this talk... if you dare. You may find yourself agreeing that the "schmutz" on the page really deserves our love.

Ian Randal Strock is the author of *Punctilious Punctuation* (Milherst Publishing, 2025), as well as several books on Presidential history, and a slew of short science fiction stories. He's the editor-in-chief and publisher of Fantastic Books and Gray Rabbit Publications. And he's passionate about the proper—and poetic—uses of punctuation.

Two Rooms and a Boom –

Cassie Morphy

Description: Two Rooms and a Boom is a social deduction game that is explosively fun. Try to blow up the President, or keep him safe, by moving people between rooms. Games run about 20 minutes, and our Game Mistress Cassie will keep things moving quickly, so if you miss the start feel free to come for later games.

Poker Tournament –

Deb Stone

Description: Join Deb for a Texas Hold'em tournament (buy-in \$10) and show your poker prowess! Sign-up sheet will be available at the Registration desk (minimum of 6 participants required to hold the tournament)

Poker game –

Deb Stone

Description: If tournament poker isn't your thing, or if you were busy in the afternoon, we will be happy to have a regular (friendly) poker game at this time.

Double-Deck Cancellation Hearts Tournament — Business Center – 7:30 to 9:30 PM

Andrea Giarnieri

Whiskey Tasting – To Be Confirmed

Description: You will be immersed in the fascinating world of Scotch whisky; you will learn how to nose and taste, and you will experience four 12-year-old Scotch whiskies to compare side by side. The goal overall? Have fun, learn and enjoy the whiskies together!

Sunday, January 25, 2026

Leadership Development Workshop: Let's Communicate! –

NNJ Mensa ExComm

Description

Do you remember that classic line from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*? “What we have here is a failure to communicate!” Come to this repeat of our 2025 LDW, to learn about how to use a simple free online graphics tool, how to add posts and pages to our WordPress website, and how to participate in our social media.

BLAST! Good-byes — Meeting room A –11:30 AM to 12 noon

Everyone is encouraged to participate!

Time to acknowledge the winners of our tournaments, thank all the volunteers, and share any feedback.

END
