



NEWS

Creating Community and Support for Seniors, Aging Boomers

Mary Howe, wife of former Mayor Don Lane, says she helped start Village Santa Cruz to fill void

MARY HOWE, A RETIRED INSTRUMENTATION TECHNICIAN AT UCSC, FOUNDED VILLAGE SANTA CRUZ AFTER REALIZING HOW LIMITED RESOURCES ARE FOR GROWING SENIOR POPULATION. PHOTO: KEANA PARKER

By Georgia Johnson

Posted on August 29, 2017

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Two billion people will be over the age of 60 by 2050. That will be 22 percent of the world's population—and far more than the current senior care system is prepared to accommodate. With over 10,000 baby boomers reaching retirement age every day, Mary Howe says there is an urgent need for more attention to senior issues.

“The thing I have become the most interested in is aging, and we don't do it very well in the United States,” says Howe, a former instrumentation technician at UCSC and wife of former Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane. “I set out to learn whatever I could about aging.”

That's when Howe started taking online courses on the psychology and sociology of aging, and pursuing certification as a caregiver and activity coordinator. In her studies, she learned that aging well, as desirable and simple as it may sound, is much bigger than any singular medical task.

She also learned how severely underprepared the county is to support its aging communities.

After watching her father's health deteriorate and seeing her elderly neighbor struggle with medical issues, Howe realized she had to do something to expand elder care in Santa Cruz and make it more accessible. Since retiring three years ago, she's started [Village Santa Cruz](#), a local chapter of the [Village to Village Network](#), a nationwide nonprofit providing "a strong community that offers members new opportunities to age successfully," according to its website.

The backbone of Village Santa Cruz is a younger generation of people like Howe, who's 62, volunteering to help elders do things like pick up groceries and do computer work. The idea is that when the current group of volunteers is older, they will have a support system to lean on, as a new generation steps up. The model functions on a membership base, and the local chapter, sometimes called Village SC for short, charges dues of about \$300 annually.

Howe also volunteers for the federal long-term-care Ombudsman program, which advocates for residents of skilled nursing and assisted-living facilities. "What I see is a lot of very lonely people, in spite of the fact that they are surrounded by people," Howe says.

The baby boomer generation will be the largest group of seniors ever, which is why their aging is sometimes called the "silver tsunami."

"Everybody knows it's coming, but some communities are better than others at getting at the front end, and Santa Cruz has not been very good at it," Howe says, adding that many senior programs in town are severely underfunded. "With the [federal] government talking about cuts—frankly, in Santa Cruz County, seniors have not been a big issue."

Now at 48 members, ranging from early fifties to their eighties, Howe's nonprofit branch aims to support the elderly in a more effective and empowering way than a retirement home. Her husband Don Lane is among the members who volunteer their time. Howe hopes that eventually younger people will volunteer, creating a connection between generations that she thinks is typically lacking.

"People don't see you when you get older," she says.

Howe says these "villages" around the country aim to build a sense of community and avoid duplicating services by pinpointing what is lacking in the community and helping to provide services that currently don't exist. She, along with 12 other locals, opened Village Santa Cruz in February.

"There are a lot of people like me who are retired now but still have a lot of energy to volunteer," Howe says. "There are a lot of seniors that have said they want to keep the intergenerational connection, and find a way so that we aren't just in a bubble of seniors."

California, from Eureka to San Diego. Sponsored by the Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County, Village SC is concluding phase one of their three-phase timeline, starting with a basic membership and background checks for volunteers. The next phase will include a premium membership that offers more direct aid, as well as membership scholarships and non-member volunteers, followed by the third phase, which, Howe says, will expand across the county and create community circles—subsets of the village that cater to the needs of individual locations.

“The village isn’t the whole answer to how to deal with the growing senior populations. It’s just a piece of it,” Howe says. “If we had 10 percent of the Santa Cruz county seniors, that would be fantastic. When I look at long term goals, that’s it.”

Ten percent of the current senior population in Santa Cruz is about 6,300 people—a number that’s expected to increase to about 8,800 by 2030. Howe hopes to have 100 members by the end of the year, while also diversifying the organization by reaching out to South County residents and identity organizations within Santa Cruz.

“Nobody is completely independent,” Howe says. “Sometimes in our lives we help a lot and we don’t need a lot in return. Other times we need a lot, and it’s okay to ask.”

To learn more about Village Santa Cruz or find out how to get involved, visit villagesantacruz.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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1 COMMENT



Jessica Bukowinski, Village Santa Cruz Outreach
Coordinator

August 30, 2017 at 6:19 pm

Great pic, Mary, and I love the quote at the end. “Nobody is completely independent,” Howe says. “Sometimes in our lives we help a lot and we

Village Santa Cruz is recruiting members and volunteers as we grow. GoodTimes readers are welcome to join us for our upcoming Introduction to Village Santa Cruz presentation on Tues 9/12 at 11am at the Watsonville Public Library or join us for a live webcast with Aul Gawande on The Value of Community Monday 9/25 in Aptos. Please visit our website for more information and to find additional upcoming events.

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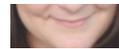
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