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## Older St. Louis adults take aging into their own hands by building a 'village'

By Doug Moore St. Louis Post-Dispatch Feb 13, 2018



Gloria Gordon, 94, one of the original members of STL Village, talks to the group about the need for seniors to be willir help when they really need it on Sunday, Jan. 28, 2018, during a "Souper Sunday" gathering at Executive House on We the Central West End. Behind Gordon is Linda Pinsker, 67, (middle) and Lois Tegethoff, 72. STL Village is a group of sen want to stay active and independent. Photo by J.B. Forbes, [jforbes@post-dispatch.com](mailto:jforbes@post-dispatch.com)

**ST. LOUIS** • A few months ago, Gloria Gordon decided it was time to give up driving.

For many older adults, parking the car for the final time symbolizes letting go of independence. But Gordon, 94, doesn't see it that way.

She is part of a network of people who help each other, whether it be with a ride to the doctor or assistance setting up a computer. The group, now entering its fifth year, is called a village. Not a brick-and-mortar community but one that links those 50 and older to one another to remain independent, socially engaged and educated on issues such as health care and scams targeting the elderly.

The village movement began about 15 years ago in Boston and has grown to 230 communities in 46 states. There are 130 more villages in development. Five years ago, Gordon helped start what would become known as STL Village, a nonprofit that shares the model of similar networks across the country. It is funded by annual memberships and fundraisers, and those who join determine what the priorities of the village should be.

With older people "swimming in an ocean of ageism," villages are crucial in helping both change the attitudes toward the elderly while creating safe, vibrant links to others who may also be facing social isolation, Gordon said.

Still, there is resistance to joining a group that targets those of a certain age. Some seniors view asking for assistance as a weakness, an admission of getting old. That is why the group is holding steady at 75 members.

"How am I going to look if I ask for help?" Gordon said, echoing the comments she has heard. "We're a smart bunch of people and can figure out a way to say: 'It's OK to ask for help.'"

Gordon made her remarks during a recent Sunday afternoon social, featuring a couple of pots of soup and more than a couple of bottles of wine. It took place in the community room of a condo building in the Central West End, the heart of the Village and the neighborhood where Gordon lives and wants to stay.

When the group was formed, it was thought members would be drawn to a pool of volunteers to help with minor home repairs and offer rides to the grocery store, and to tap into a list of vetted service providers such as plumbers, electricians and lawn care companies. Instead, members want more social activities. A billiard party, poker games, happy hours, a creative writing group and trips to places such as Kansas City and Bentonville, Ark., have dotted the calendar of events so far.

Within the group, there are the “not readies,” said Sally Nikolajevich, 66, who serves as board chairman and is a member along with her husband, George, 71. That includes those who are in their 50s and 60s who want to enhance their social circle but do not need to lean on others for help around the house or with transportation, she said.

As a result, STL Village offers a two-tiered membership. To tap all aspects of the village, the cost is \$600 per year and open only to those who live in the village footprint, which includes the Central West End and the eastern portion of University City, to Pennsylvania Avenue. The boundary stops at Vandeventer Avenue on the east, goes north to Page Boulevard and runs south along parts of Clayton, Oakland and Manchester avenues. An associate membership, for \$300, is open to any St. Louis area resident, and gives access to social events and to the list of preferred vendors, but not to the pool of volunteers.

Ron Barrett, 78, was drawn to the social aspect of the group. After his partner of 35 years died four years ago, he found himself isolated.

“I didn’t really have a lot of friends and acquaintances,” Barrett said. “The friends I’ve made through the village, I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

Joining the village, Barrett has ventured to places he had not been before, including day trips to Cahokia Mounds, wine country and Bellefontaine Cemetery.

Barrett serves on the group's activities committee, which is planning a trip to Chicago. While he does not yet tap into the services aspect of the village, Barrett pays the full membership. He knows he may need a volunteer's help someday. But more importantly, he wants to give the village as much support as possible.

"It means a lot to me," Barrett said.

The budget for the village is small, about \$82,000 a year, and there is only one paid position, held by executive director Madeline Franklin. She said the village is marketed primarily by word-of-mouth and has a goal of expanding to 100 members this year. The average membership of villages nationwide is 125. Meanwhile, the St. Louis village is working to help residents in both the Old North and Tower Grove East neighborhoods form their own networks. Organizers are doing so in a hub-and-spoke model so the new groups can tap into the established STL Village for various services and not have to apply for their own nonprofit status.

Groups in north St. Louis County and in Richmond Heights also have been in contact about creating their own villages.

Natalie Galucia, director of operations for Village to Village Network, a national organization providing guidance and resources for each of the communities, said the slow growth of the St. Louis village is fairly typical.

"There is a core group that gets in and is really busy right from the get-go," Galucia said. "But there are still some a little hesitant, who don't join or drop out because they don't see the value just yet."

As each new village matures and word gets out of what the community model is about, memberships typically increase, she said.

STL Village members such as Gordon are using the group to change perceptions of old age as more than disabilities and dementia, said Nancy Morrow-Howell, a gerontologist and director of the Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging at Washington University.

She co-teaches an interdisciplinary class called “When I’m Sixty-Four: Transforming Your Future.” It’s a freshman seminar that takes its title from a Beatles song about loving your sweetheart well after youth has faded:

When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now. Will you still be sending me a valentine, birthday greetings, bottle of wine?

“We say: You’re going to live into your 80s and 90s, and half of you into the 100s, so be thinking about it now, and about changing society so it will be better,” Morrow-Howell said. She was familiar with the village movement; when it came to St. Louis, she got involved and then tapped into members to come to her class.

In the fall, 15 members of STL Village participated in the class alongside 75 freshmen.

“It’s important that they bring in their own stories, and the students are talking with them instead of about them,” Morrow-Howell said. “They are an important voice in the conversation.”

Gordon, a psychologist, has long been pushing back against negative perceptions of older people. She shared the story of her doctor walking into the exam room and saying: “Hello, young lady.” It did not sit well with Gordon.

After the appointment concluded, Gordon told the doctor she did not appreciate the greeting.

“He said other patients like it, and I told him things are changing now and advised him to stop doing it,” Gordon said. “That’s what it takes. This is a period of consciousness. Ageism is so deeply enmeshed in our society. People don’t realize they are acting on the basis of a negative attitude of people who are older. They think being condescending is somehow laudable.”

It’s a story Gordon shares with the Washington University class as well. Morrow-Howell said the village movement has the opportunity to take on an advocacy role as the country prepares for the “longevity revolution.”

Gordon agrees, saying that once older adults admit they are indeed older adults, stereotypes will begin to crumble and villages will be viewed as an extension of living, not as a group for the elderly.

“There are an awful lot of people who don’t want to tell their age because of the way they will be viewed,” Gordon said. “I never wanted to hide my age. I brag about it.”

### Joining a village

To learn more about STL Village:

**Phone** • 314-240-5020

**Online** • [stlvillage.org](http://stlvillage.org)

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### Doug Moore

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