

RETIRING | TAMMY La GORCE

Building a Generational Partnership for the Aged

A network assists older people with the services they need to remain in their homes.

AT 88, SUSAN McWHINNEY-MORSE is a member of the Silent Generation, so named by some demographers partly for its heads-down, sleeves-up approach to hard work. She fits the industrious profile. But silent she is not.

Two decades ago in Boston, she became one of the foremothers of the Village Movement, an effort to link neighbors, mostly people nearing retirement age, who wanted to help one another age in place. The movement that started in her hometown is now a presence in 45 states and Washington, D.C. Its goal, to provide older adults with access to the practical supports they need to stay independent at home and engaged in communities, remains.

Now, the demographics of the Village Movement may be changing.

Ms. McWhinney-Morse was in her mid-60s when she and a handful of others her age started laying the groundwork for Beacon Hill Village. But younger villagers are surfacing. Jenn Prunty founded My Glacier Village in the Flathead Valley of Montana four years ago, when she was 49. Kathy O’Kane started volunteering at her village in Pennsylvania, Lancaster Downtowners, in 2018, when she was 51, with an eye toward eventually retiring to it. And Conner Sandefur, 44, joined Fearrington Cares, a village in Pittsboro, N.C., two years ago.

The movement’s caring, common-sense core drew them. Members of these grass-roots nonprofits band together to identify needs familiar to aging people, like shoveling snow or figuring out Zoom, and set up a network of volunteers and affordable professionals, like plumbers and electricians, to meet them. Social programs that might include lectures and exercise classes help chip away at isolation. Some villages have dozens of members, others hundreds. Some are run by volunteers, others by paid staff. They serve urban, suburban and rural areas. Most villages rely on member dues for at least half their funding, but some get donations and grants from the government and foundations.

That Generation X, or those born between 1965 and 1980, is paying attention to the Village Movement should surprise no one, said Barbara Sullivan, the executive director of the Village to Village Network, an organizing body for the 268 villages that are running and an information hub for the 68 in development.

“When I look at Gen Xers, I see a generation that is witnessing the Silent Generation and baby boomers reaching their golden years and needing more services,” she said. “They’re saying: ‘OK, I’m 55. In 10 years, we’re going to be retiring. Where do we want to be?’”

For Ms. Prunty, 53, of Kalispell, Mont., the villages are the opposite of where her father ended up when her mother died in 2017 — alone in his home in California but not ready to move. “Watching him adjust to being alone was hard,” she said. “He felt displaced and unneeded.”

Ms. Prunty saw a magazine article about the movement around the same time. “It got me thinking about how we’re aging in this country,” she said. “You have to start thinking about: ‘Who’s in my tribe? Who’s going to get me groceries if I’m sick?’” With a friend and fellow Gen Xer, Cindy O’Boyle, she joined the Village to Village Network in 2018. My Glacier Village, the network they built together, started by serving 10 members, who pay \$35 a month, in late 2019.

“We helped with pet care and laundry, and we took people to chemotherapy appointments,” she said. Rides to appointments are a key service in most villages but may be especially important in rural Montana, where members are spread out. My Glacier Villages has members in towns, including Kalispell and Whitefish, that can be nearly 20 miles apart.

When Covid struck, Ms. Prunty and 30 fellow volunteers, many in their 50s with full-time jobs, organized soup deliveries and drive-by birthday parties. The goal was to assuage what she sensed was an epidemic of isolation and pride among locals in her father’s generation, in their 70s and 80s. “No one wanted to ask for help,” she said.



Now she is envisioning her own future, and the future of Generation X, in villages.

“We’re going to inherit this movement,” she said. With My Glacier Village now at 86 members, they might expand the movement, too. Ms. Prunty suspects that the pandemic accelerated her age group’s investment.

“My generation is one that had gotten used to going to work and going out for coffee and lunches,” she said. The lack of interaction brought on by Covid was, for some, a foreshadowing of what isolation could feel like in retirement, less than a dozen years down the road for many Gen Xers. “I think we’re going: ‘This movement has to work. We’re going to need it.’”

Ms. O’Kane, 55, of Lancaster Township, Pa., has been spreading the word about the Village Movement to peers since she started volunteering with Lancaster Downtowners in 2018. Now, she is vice president of the 204-member village; she and her husband pay annual dues (\$175 for singles, \$318 for households) and hope to reap the benefits down the road.

“When I first heard about it, I thought: ‘Awesome. Why doesn’t everybody know about this?’” she said. Her background as a registered nurse added appeal. “Too many times as a nurse, I would discharge a patient in their 70s to an empty home, and they would end up back in the hospital a week later,” she recalled. “I thought, ‘Maybe if they had an ounce of help at home, they’d have a better quality of life.’” The village, she found, was doing just that: letting older people remain home with lives they recognized — and peace of mind.

A late February hot dog roast at a park was typical of Downtowners’ social gatherings. And a “health buddies” program Ms. O’Kane started recently, in which volunteers accompany members to doctors’ appointments, provides members with informal advocates who can help ask questions and make sure members are clear on doctors’ instructions. The idea came from her nursing career: “You don’t hear everything when you go to the doctor,” she said. “You could leave not understanding what your medications are.”

Downtowners’ dues had already gotten them help with rides to the airport, yard work and dog walking. Ms. O’Kane hopes to take advantage of the same services when she and her family need them. It’s just like anything else, she said: “You throw something out there, you get something back. The whole thing is beautiful.”

And it’s potentially life changing, even before retirement. Dr. Sandefur’s village,



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Fearrington Cares, is in a 2,500-resident subdivision rather than spread throughout a neighborhood or across municipalities.

Dr. Sandefur was an assistant biology professor at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke when he moved to the subdivision with his wife, Brittany Marino Sandefur, and two daughters in April 2020. The village, which serves the entire subdivision’s mostly over-65 residents without charging dues (fund-raising and donations cover its costs), wasn’t the main attraction — a rental house in a tight pandemic real estate market was.

Dr. Sandefur started teaching remotely almost as soon as he moved in. With the extra time at home, he volunteered for Fearrington Cares, changing light bulbs for neighbors and moving heavy plants off porches. Then he discovered that, like other villages, volunteers were encouraged to offer their own skills. With his above-average

command of computers, he was soon recovering logins and setting up Hulu accounts. “People need help with technical things,” he said. “I do feel needed, for sure. I stay quite busy.”

From the beginning, villages have been committed to keeping minds active, bodies healthy and souls intact, Ms. McWhinney-Morse said. Her generation and subsequent ones no longer see nursing homes as an inevitability, she said: “We’re not as conscious or fearful of, oh, you’re going to fall or forget your meds.”

That doesn’t mean villages suit everyone’s needs. Many were started by white, middle-class neighbors and are still situated in largely white, middle-class communities (an Asian-American village in Oakland, Calif., has been successful; one geared toward Latino members is in development in Winter Park, Fla.). Ms. Sullivan said efforts to diversify are underway. One involves bringing the movement to settings with broad ethnic and socioeconomic reaches, like churches.

Once established, villages don’t always thrive. When they shut down, money is often the culprit. “Villages continue to have an uphill struggle with financial stability,” Ms. Sullivan said. Since 2012, 29 member villages have dissolved. Of those, six closed since the pandemic began. Some cited money as the reason; others, stalled membership growth. A few closed because of conflicts over people’s vaccination status. Some villages that were starting to develop decided to wait until after the pandemic.

The lack of a collective plan for staying afloat stretches back to the movement’s roots. “In the early years, many of the ‘dreamers’ did not do their homework,” Ms. Sullivan said. Most started without a business plan or a needs analysis. A younger generation taking the reins might be more attuned to finding better financial footing.

“Generation X seems to be a purpose-driven bunch,” said Ms. Sullivan, who added that the cohort may volunteer at a higher rate than other generations. The movement’s ability to form partnerships and tap into community resources at levels that defray the cost of running a village may determine its ability to sustain itself.

Dr. Sandefur is counting on it. “Talking about Fearrington Cares makes me a little emotional,” he said. In 2021, he started a mathematical modeling company called Sandefur Modeling; one retired friend in his village helped him design a logo, and another put together a free business analysis. “You can find a sense of purpose here,” he said. “We feel very fortunate.”

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