



New communities allow urban seniors to age in Center City

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By Carolyn Beeler

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This is part of a series on aging in the Delaware Valley called "Gray Matters: New Tools for Growing Older" from the WHY Y Health and Science Desk. The six-week series features audio and video stories as well as personal essays.

If you missed hearing this program this morning (May 4) you can still hear it this evening at 6:00 p.m. on WHY Y. See:
<http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/local/item/37830>



Mary Anne Hunter at Friends Center City Riverfront

With 10,000 baby boomers a day turning 65, a central question facing those planning for the silver tsunami: Where will they all age?

Nearly ten years ago, somewhere around dessert and coffee at a potluck dinner, a group of friends a generation older asked themselves the same thing.

Mary Anne Hunter and members of her Quaker meeting group knew they wanted to live in a retirement community when they got older. The only problem? They were all urban people and couldn't picture themselves out in the suburbs.

"We thought we would like to have that kind of supportive community that many of the Quaker retirement communities provide, but we don't want to live in the suburbs," Hunter said. "So we said, why don't we ... why don't we make one here?"

The idea would fit an unmet niche: a downtown retirement community, not out in the suburbs like pioneering Quaker life-care communities such as Kendal and Foulkeways. This community would house members of the expanding Center City population that wants to take advantage of the city - and continue to walk to the theater and restaurants - well into old age.

Hunter said the group thought they might hand the idea off to a company like Kendal to develop, but when that didn't happen, they ended up scouting locations and pricing buildings themselves.

'A need for innovation'

Almost ten years and many iterations of their plan later, Hunter would eventually help found Friends Center City Riverfront, which includes twenty units in an Old City condo building with a shared common space and additional, optional services, including coordinated healthcare and housekeeping.

Nora Dowd Eisenhower, former Pennsylvania Secretary of Aging, said she expects to see more grassroots communities like this one created as the baby boomers age.

"The options for people as they age in this country," Eisenhower said, "There aren't enough. There aren't enough places to live, and there really is a need for innovation."

Mary Anne Hunter said for the group around the dinner table the night the idea was devised, working together to get things done was nothing new. She and her South Street neighbors started babysitting co-ops when they had kids, and worked to revitalize neighborhood schools when they reached that age.

"Our age group invented a lot of things that we needed," Hunter said. In middle age, they noticed older people, especially those with ailing partners, fared better when they lived in an intentional community. So they set to work.

"We got to this stage of life and different things were needed, and I think it just seemed natural to us," Hunter said.

Hunter is currently the only member in that original group living at Riverfront, which opened last summer and is still less than half full. But the sense of community the founders envisioned has been retained. The eight residents - some Quakers, some not - eat dinner together twice a week. They alternate between a neighborhood restaurant and eating take-out in their shared dining room, reminiscent of a college common room, only swankier.

"One of things I thought was important was the concept of community, and now I know I was right," said resident Mary Ellen McNish. She and her husband were drawn to the building's location and optional coordinated healthcare services. Just as important was the commitment residents share to make an intentional community.

"It just has created a camaraderie," McNish said. "I've lived in apartment buildings and you don't have it in those buildings. But this is different."

Hunter and some of the other single women have a system in place to keep an eye on each other - they put a bandanna on their door handle at night, and if it hasn't been removed by morning, a neighbor drops by to make sure everything is OK.



Joan Countryman and Mary Ellen McNish chat over Indian take-out in Friends Center City Riverfront's common dining room. (Carolyn Beeler/WHYY)

'Community in it's own right'

The condo community took years to get up and running, but nearly as soon as the idea was hatched, the founders set up all kinds of groups, including book clubs, walking clubs, and ethnic eating clubs, to feed into the proposed retirement community.

Now, those groups are the center of a 'community without walls' with 1,400 people on an events mailing list.

This network of activities creates the camaraderie Hunter had in mind for those who can't afford steep center city condo prices, and is what local aging experts say sets Friends Center City apart.

Resident Joan Countryman sees the whole package as similar, in her words, to summer camp for old people.

"An opportunity to be independent at the same time that you are in a community and feeling supported is certainly exactly what I aspire to," Countryman said.

Nora Dowd Eisenhower, who is now an executive with the National Council on Aging, sees the complex as part of a larger trend of seniors devising ways to remain independent as long as possible, and doing it in diverse, inter-generational communities, not enclaves built upon corn fields.

"When you look across the country at top-ten retirement destinations cities, places where people like to go, invariably it's a community of all ages," Eisenhower said. "It may be a university town, there's something there, entertainment, theater culture."

Friends Center City now has a grant to explore whether the community-building model would work at two apartment buildings in Philadelphia where many seniors already live, so-called NORCS, or Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities.

The idea is to make this type of community network available to people of all incomes.

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Aging in place with the help of a village
by Carolyn Beeler

Gail Small, 70, has lived in her Old City apartment for 28 years. She enjoys the shops and art galleries nearby, and likes knowing her neighbors.

When she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2001, it started getting harder and harder for her to get around. Her nearby family is also aging and could not take responsibility for her care, so Small joined Penn's Village, a non-profit organization that connects members to volunteers who take them to the grocery store, help with chores around the house, or just sit and visit.

Small said the group has allowed her to remain in her home instead of going to a senior living facility.

"It would be heartbreaking," Small said of moving. "This is my home." The 'village' movement started in the upscale Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston about ten years ago. There are now about 90 open around the country, and they all look a little different. Some have a schedule of social events for members, some have paid coordinators while others are all volunteer-driven, and many have vetted vendor lists available for a fee.

But the central idea for all the villages is the same: give seniors the support they need to age in place, so they can remain involved in their communities as long as possible.

Small gets rides to her physical therapy appointments a few times a

week, as well as to doctor's appointments or the grocery store less frequently. She recently even had a volunteer return a printer for her. "It's more than just a ride because you become involved in their (the volunteers) lives, and they become involved in your life, and we see each other on social occasions," Small said. "So I find it's very beneficial."

Dr. Bob Kay, another center city resident and retired psychiatrist, frequently gives Small rides to physical therapy.

"We're a social and cooperative animal, and we need to feel useful, and that's the reason that I volunteer," Kay said. "It is because I get the pleasure out of being useful. It's a good feeling."

Penn's Village has about 120 members in Center City and charges \$600 a year for unlimited access to volunteers, though a sliding scale is offered for lower-income people.

The group is currently re-structuring are about to launch a fundraising and marketing effort to revitalize their organization, but they are not the only village in the area.

East Falls Village started last year and is focused on a much smaller geographic area. It is a little more member-driven than Penn's Village - the members organize the structure and do most of the volunteering too. Crozer-Keystone health system has a version of a village that connects members to approved services, but it does not have the same volunteer network that is the hallmark of the traditional village movement.

Villages are also in development in Levittown, Pa., and Moorestown, N.J. Joan Countryman and Mary Ellen McNish chat over Indian take-out in Friends Center City Riverfront's common dining room. (Carolyn Beeler/WHYY)

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