

FOR Alexandria SENIORS, IT Takes A VILLAGE

BY MARY DEMPSEY

On a recent December afternoon, friends gathered in an Alexandria waterfront condominium. They stood about in festive sweaters and scarves to mingle, sip coffee or wine, and nibble on hors d'oeuvres. Wide windows welcomed showcased the Potomac, silvery in the dim light of a fast-approaching autumn evening. The sky outside darkened, the lights within glowed warm and the guests grew quiet as they were regaled by captivating tales of yore.

Despite what it seemed, this gathering was not a posh holiday party but an event sponsored by At Home in Alexandria (AHA), a non-profit organization that seeks to provide comfort and community to local senior citizens.

This particular get-together was part of the "Conversation" series which invites various well-known speakers and professionals to give talks to members about topics of interest. On this particular occasion, journalist Michael Lee Pope was discussing his book "Shotgun Justice: One Prosecutor's Crusade against Crime and Corruption in Alexandria and Arlington," which delves into the sordid history of illicit gambling in turn-of-the-century Northern Virginia.

The waterfront condomi-



Photo courtesy of AHA

AHA members and volunteers participate in the 2016 Alexandria Scottish Walk.



Photo courtesy of AHA

Members visit the Alexandria Black History Museum. From left to right, Jane Coughran, Bill Clayton, Indie Cather, Mary Nefedov, and Ann Mazor.



Photo courtesy of AHA

The AHA cycling club, "Blazing Saddles," getting ready for a ride

ium, home of AHA members Cynthia and Al Boyer, provided the perfect setting for the talk, as audience members were able to gaze contemplatively out the window towards the site of the new MGM casino and reflect upon all that has changed--and not changed--over the past hundred or so years.

The "Conversation" events are just one way that AHA

(affectionately referred to as "Aha!" by its members) brings members together to socialize, enjoy hobbies and experience something new.

Members can attend any of the "Lunch Around" or "Dine Around" events to try new restaurants, join their fellow opera-lovers at one of the "Met Opera" viewings at local movie theaters, or just kick back for a good time at one of the regular ladies nights or happy hours. There are also clubs for cyclists, walkers, and bridge players. Members can even choose to march in Alexandria's annual Scottish Walk.

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Photo by Mary Dempsey

Member and hostess Cynthia Boyer poses with member Liz Campbell during a recent "Conversation" event.

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According to AHA executive director Cele Garrett, many of the social aspects of the organization evolved organically. “[Members] would say, ‘You know, I love to go to the theater. Does anybody else like going?’ and then we started a theater group,” said Garrett. “You generally just need one person to spearhead it. We just go along and try new things [. . .] We have this couple, they love to cycle, and they started our cycling club.”

The abundant opportunities to socialize and keep active are important since seniors are at risk of becoming socially isolated. AHA considers its social events of particular importance and even offers a social membership, called an Associate membership, for those who want to participate in group activities but are not ready to commit to the full-service membership.

The social focus of AHA makes it quite unique, but the organization is one of many “at home” or “village” movements throughout the area. According to Garrett, the movement started 15 years ago in Boston when a group of Beacon Hill residents came together to help their aging neighbors stay in their homes rather than having to relocate to assisted living facilities and nursing homes.

At Home in Alexandria was founded in 2009 by three Alexandria citizens, Dick Moose, Dr. Judith Jones, and Ernie Lehmann, who saw a need for a different kind of senior care and had heard about the village movement through a news article.

According to the Village to Village Network, an organization that provides support to villages throughout the country, there are now over 200 existing villages with many more being developed. At Home in Alexandria is part of the Washington Area Villages Exchange (WAVE), which connects 48 regional villages, including the Arlington Neighborhood Village and Mount Vernon at Home.

All of the villages share a common goal, which is to rally community members together to assist the senior citizens living among them. Villages aim to keep older people in their homes longer so that they do not have to leave the comfort, security, and familiarity of their much-beloved and long-time residences.

“Living in Alexandria as you age can be a real problem,” said Cynthia Boyer, a textile artist who is still active in the art community. “There aren’t a lot of single floor homes.”

Alexandria takes pride in

its many historic homes, but these very homes can provide challenges for seniors. That’s where the full membership services AHA offers can help seniors maintain a high quality of life within their own homes. AHA volunteers can help members with minor home repairs, electronics, yard work and organizing.

“I call when I get stuck technologically,” said Boyer. “There are two guys who are my tech guys. Other people might need someone to help them with their yard.”

At times it’s important for these senior residents to simply have another pair of eyes to evaluate their environment. Garrett recalled a particular instance when a member’s walkway was fraught with loose bricks. A volunteer who had come to take the member on an errand noticed the issue and reported it right away to the member’s family and AHA. It was taken care of promptly.

“You’ve got an advocate. You’ve got a resource,” said Garrett. She added that “We often communicate with adult children who are out of town who want to know ‘how’s mom?’”

Full members of AHA can file service requests by emailing or calling the AHA offices. Those requests are then entered into a database where volunteers can select the requests that they can most immediately fulfill.

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So, who are the AHA volunteers? According to Garrett, they are mainly members themselves. The beauty of the village movement is that the distinction between volunteer and member is often blurry and the services provided are more about genuine concern and companionship than obligation.

“Our top volunteer is an 81-year-old member,” said Garrett. “He’s amazing. He writes our monthly newsletter. He’s a board member. He just does anything for us. You’d have to have five volunteers, ten volunteers to replace him.”

The much-esteemed member and volunteer she referred to is Bill Clayton. Clayton, a retired journalist of 51 years, attends most events, including the recent “Conversation” event, so that he can take photos and notes for newsletter articles.

“I got involved and became a volunteer, took over the newsletter,” said Clayton. He added that he helps a lot with transportation and always makes sure he assists anyone who needs a lift to one of the social events. He also helps out with home repairs. “We have a couple of members who, because of carpal tunnel or arthritis, need help” with small tasks from changing light bulbs to using a screwdriver.

Clayton, a fit-looking man

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who stands tall and was dressed in a striking dark suit for the “Conversation” event, said he doesn’t use the services much himself, but said he knows he “will need them someday.”

Lynne Dearborn, who is a full member, feels similarly about the services provided by AHA. She is more involved in the social aspects but appreciates the security of knowing she can call upon AHA services if she is in need. “I kind of like using it as an insurance policy,” said Dearborn.

Other members are more dependent and rely heavily on AHA services.

“There’s an amazing woman in this building,” said Cynthia Boyer. “She can’t see, but she’s

a bridge player. Someone [from AHA] was coming over regularly and reading to her.”

According to Garrett, the number one request is transportation.

“It’s a major concern all around,” said Garrett. “Transportation is the biggest concern for seniors. A lot of them will get macular degeneration. Their vision isn’t what it once was. Some just don’t feel comfortable driving in this traffic. It’s a major problem trying to keep people from being isolated.”

The beauty of AHA is its flexibility. Unlike many of the services provided by other organizations, AHA members can easily pick and choose what services they need.

“[Some organizations] will come out to see if you truly are needy,” said Garrett. “They’re

going to check you out. They’re great organizations, they really are. It’s just a different model. They’re restricted to a particular population.”

At times, members may even find that they need AHA to help out with surprising and even unfortunate tasks.

“I had a member who lost his wife two years ago,” recalled Garrett. “He was devastated. I was checking up on him, emailing him. I met him for coffee to try and see how we could help. I could tell after a few conversations that he was trying to wrap his mind around a memorial service [. . .] he was really stuck.” In response, Garrett assembled a group of volunteers to help him organize the event.

Recognizing seniors as dynamic and inspiring rather than needy and

helpless, AHA celebrates the accomplishments and abilities of its members.

“Our members were like rock stars in their careers,” said Garrett. “They are interesting people. They travel a lot [. . .] These are people who have done a lot of amazing, amazing things.”

At Home in Alexandria seeks to allow seniors to continue to live vibrant lives and pursue their interests and passions. It doesn’t tie them down or require them to fulfill any obligations. Ultimately, as Garrett described, AHA “will do what a good neighbor would do.”

“There’s a certain spirit [within AHA]” said Virginia Martin, an associate member, and chair of the “Conversation” events. “You look out for one

another.”

Perhaps if the village movement grows large enough, it could provide a more widespread solution to issues facing seniors. For now, AHA is doing whatever it can to support its aging members, evolving and growing to meet the ever-changing needs of this diverse population.

“You might not know what your needs are,” said Garrett. “Just call us. We don’t have a list of dos and don’ts. We just say, if you’ve got a need, call us.”

*Find out more by visiting
www.athomeinalexandria.org.
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