

Aging in Place: We are living our futures now

By Marian Knapp

I was a casual planner for much of my life. A lot of my early planning revolved around what was expected – do well enough in high school to go to college (even though my studies didn't prepare me to earn a living), marry, have a family, live in a house, maybe work at some kind of job when my kids were old enough... and then what? My planning didn't involve much thinking and what little there was didn't have a lot of depth and substance. Mainly, I just let things proceed with little intervention on my part.

It wasn't until I was around 50 in the late 1980s that I began to realize that serendipity wasn't necessarily the best way to let the future happen. As a newly single woman, I had few savings and not a whole lot of marketable skills. I owned a small house but had no idea how to sustain it over time. It was then that planning became foremost and I set out to achieve two goals: afford a decent place to live and not be poor when I was old. Fortune and luck continued to play an important role, but I became much more deliberate in taking advantage of promising opportunities. I got involved in organizing local political campaigns and, as a result, was offered a job based on my previously unknown or unacknowledged (by me) organizing capabilities. Over the next years, I gained more skills and knowledge, and finally garnered enough self-confidence (and salary) to know that I could live in a decent place. Goal number one was accomplished.

The second goal—achieve some financial stability—required a much more conscious effort. I made the assumption that I would be my own primary support—it was up to me and only me. I had no idea where to begin but found an early-morning adult education course on financial planning for women—inexpensive, easy to get to, and good timing for a working woman.

This course ended up being a defining episode for my planning. It wasn't even the whole hour that was significant. It was a one-second statement: "Pay yourself first!" the instructor said. "You have to pay your bills but you must consider yourself the first payee. Pay yourself first and then pay your other bills. You won't miss that money and you will secure your future." That very day I arranged to make the maximum contribution to my employer's matching retirement fund. I know these perks are not so common any more but, at that time, it provided me some peace of mind and lessened my worry about being old and poor. Second goal accomplished.

That was almost 25 years ago. But once I achieved those two goals I allowed myself to drift along feeling somewhat secure – even with the recent, awful economic downturns. In the past few years, however, especially since I turned 70, I have slowly begun to realize that I needed new goals. I had become complacent and reluctant to think about what my life would look like as I continued to age. There wasn't the urgency of 25 years ago but I knew from experience that circumstances can change in an instant. Yet, I continued to think that I could wait until tomorrow.

Finally, after fighting powerful inertia, I renewed my planning. Some of my goals now are similar to those from before—around where and how to live, for example. But I added some new objectives that are more reflective and realistic because my challenges are different now: How do I continue to lead a meaningful life? And how do I define what help I might need down the road?

One on-line definition of the word “future” says “time or a period of time following the moment of speaking or writing...” I like this. It says that the future can be as short as one second away or as long as infinity. For me, it begins when I finish this article. Each time I completed something my future started anew and what had been the future became something accomplished. This means that I am already living my future and I need to hurry up and plan realistically right now for what could happen tomorrow. If I don't, I am allowing serendipity to take control of my future again.