

Knapp: Developing meaningful community connections

**By Marian L. Knapp/Columnist
Wicked Local Newton**

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An exciting, vibrant stream of community-minded activity is happening all around us - taking different forms and each with a unique emphasis. Amid all the unhappy news about the economy and world discord it is comforting to hear about efforts that bring people together in forward-thinking, creative ways. Civic initiatives focus on many aspects of our society but much is relevant to those of us who are getting older. National endeavors like Marc Freedman's "Civic Ventures" develops strategies to build encore careers directed towards positive change. The Administration on Aging provided "Community Innovations for Aging in Place" grants to help older adults remain independent in their communities. In Massachusetts, the Office of Elder Affairs has its "Civic Engagement: Work, Serve, and Learn" initiative.

What does all this mean for me (and you)? I never thought about myself as being civically engaged but, I guess, in a small way, I am. In 2008 I was appointed a member of the Newton Council on Aging and became a commissioner in 2010, which means I'm on the executive committee. I didn't take this on because of a vague desire to do some kind of good. It was more that I had some background: I study aging; know about care-giving; and experience getting older every day. I was aware that Newton was at the leading edge of aging population growth - its 60+ population around 20,000, nearly 22 percent. I also knew that this demographic shift would bring new but undefined challenges.

My incentive for becoming involved was driven more by a question rather than some abstract goal. How can I take what I know and use it for the benefit of my community? I had no idea where this question would lead me but I jumped in believing it would be a rewarding journey. So, I joined the NCOA to learn and, hopefully, assist in finding some answers. Before I became a member I knew little about the NCOA. Now I know a bit more. It is a commission appointed by the mayor and Board of Aldermen, and is, therefore, an official body representing the city. Its mission is "...to serve the needs and improve the quality of life for all Newton seniors..." It serves as an advisory board to the director of the Department of Senior Services.

During my tenure I have become aware of so much. I have learned about Newton's older population - its talents and diversity, its contributions, and how upcoming seniors may have different requirements, expectations, and skills than previous generations. I have found out about city government - how it works and the challenges it faces balancing

resources in light of residents' needs. I have been exposed to national and international trends among aging populations and how people everywhere are working to find workable strategies.

The NCOA is right in there with other communities talking about how to maintain popular programs and services while planning for an evolving future that incorporates communication technology, social and political trends, and economic pressures.

NCOA's mission focuses us on "...outreach, advocacy, education, and legislation..." Within these broad categories are multiple dimensions to be explored if we are going to address, realistically, our responsibility to the community. To do this, we need people to join us who have expertise in many arenas – computer technology, media, finance and law, demographics and statistics, community and neighborhood building, health and well-being, marketing and public relations, fund-raising, arts and culture, spirituality, and more. Does any of this sound like you? If so, we need you to help shape our future.

As I usually do each time I sit down to write an article I think hard about my intimate relationship to the topic. This time, my reflections were about how the connections that mean the most to me are manifested in a myriad of ways in ever expanding circles through my family, my friends, my neighborhood, and, further out, into my community.

Research clearly shows that people who are connected to others manage their aging better than those who live in isolation. For me, being involved in the community serves many purposes. It broadens my world, lets me meet people I would not have otherwise known, teaches me things I was ignorant of, and allows me to hope that I may be helping others.

As with other aspects of my life, I see community contribution as a piece of my legacy – what I wish people to remember about me. As you read this, think about your own legacy. Consider your knowledge and experience. Ask yourself, "How can I apply my talents to achieving a vision to make Newton a community that understands and supports all of its older citizens? Contact Jayne Colino, director, Department of Senior Services 617-796-1660. Tell her I suggested you call. We need you!

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and care-giver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on "Aging in Place in Suburbia". She is a commissioner on the Council on Aging, a citywide committee appointed by the mayor and Board of Aldermen.

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