

Knapp: What is it about the Senior Center?

By Marian L. Knapp

Newton —

My July TAB article “Make community contribution in Newton part of your legacy” explained the work of the Newton Council on Aging (NCOA). My plan was to write two articles – one on the NCOA and one on the Senior Center. The NCOA was relatively easy. I’m a member, know how it works, and understand its relationship to city government. This one has been much harder. Why?

When I write, my mode is to talk about things I know. It is only from this perspective of intense personal experience and knowledge that I can write with credibility. I can’t be a dispassionate reporter on what someone else describes. If I tried to write in this way, I know my own feelings will somehow skew my words and that doesn’t feel honest. So, I try to write what I’ve experienced and that is what fuels my inspiration.

Here is my dilemma. I sometimes volunteer at Senior Center (SC) programs, run focus groups with a colleague, have meetings there often but, in reality, I don’t participate. How can I talk about the SC when mainly what I know is from reading the Coming of Age Newsletter, NCOA meetings, and listening to people who work there?

As I framed this question I became extremely uneasy. First, I was worried about crafting an article that contradicted my perceived essence of myself as a writer. But second, and much more importantly, it made me confront my own ageist views. I could say that I don’t go to the Senior Center because for much of what is offered there I go elsewhere. I have friends and family with whom I go to the movies, take day trips, or eat and talk.

But deep down (and I acknowledge this with shame) I don’t join in because I think that the people who go there are not really like me. They are old and getting older, and I don’t want to associate with “them” – even though I have been a senior for a while now. I see them as “others”, outside me, different, and with stereotyped characteristics that I want to ignore. With all that I write about aging, surfacing issues that we seniors worry about, and presenting it in a meaningful way, I am dishonest. I can provide myself a little comfort by saying I don’t need many of the things at the SC but that doesn’t calm my deep discomfort with my conscience.

As is my pattern when confronted with something I don’t know, I gather information. In 2010 more than 4,000 people ages 50 to 100 came to the SC. They participated in activities 37,000 times. With Newton’s over 60 population at approximately 18,636 (22%), this means that a substantial proportion took advantage of programs and services. One look at the SC calendar or Newsletter gives some hint about what they did. They exercised their bodies in eight different classes, learned one of five languages, received information from health and insurance experts, gained computer skills, played or listened to classical or swing music, joined in pool or bridge, talked to local officials, got advice from social workers,

saw movies, painted, potted or wrote essays, went to museums or theaters, arranged for transportation, obtained names of people who could do minor household repairs, or simply came to find other people to talk to. A center dedicated to enhancing community life.

It is clear that the SC is a vibrant, learning, health-promoting environment. It works hard to offer new and varied programs for Newton's changing demographics, among which is a plan for a café, similar to the one at the Newton Free Library.

Having now looked at the SC with some objectivity, I must ask myself again, why don't I participate? There it is again - the ugly specter of my own ageism. Where does this come from? Perhaps I am fearful that once I put myself among other seniors I will be perceived as elderly by people of all ages who are as ageist as I am. This is a pretty difficult thing to admit but, unfortunately, it feels real.

What to do? The first is to confront myself. This won't be easy. It seems daunting to face up to the harsh realities of my own prejudices. The second is to do something practical. There is one thing at the SC that I need more of - exercise. So, I am going to try aerobics. It fits into my schedule. Hopefully, it will benefit my body and make a dent in my hidden fear of getting older.

Continue this conversation on my blog <http://voicesofaging.com>. For a full picture of senior resources see my NCOA article on <http://voicesofaging.com> or <http://www.wickedlocal.com>; "Knapp: Make community contribution in Newton part of your legacy."

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