

## December Notes from the Director

### “Making Friends”

As the severity of the economic crisis becomes more apparent each day, the likelihood of funding cuts looms. We can no longer assume that our funding sources will be able to support us as in the past. With cuts will come fewer programs and reduced staff at a time when the needs of seniors are increasing.

We need new sources of income, but more than anything we need friends. Specifically, we need people who believe in the mission of the Senior Center who can bring new energy and ideas to the work of our sister organization, The Friends of the Senior Center. The Friends, as we call them, is a group whose purpose is to raise funds in support of the Center’s work.

As I have tried to say in various ways these past months, the Center’s work is not a luxury that we as towns and as a region can do without. The health of our communities is directly tied to the well being of our older neighbors and to their thorough integration in the fabric of our common life. Especially now, we need the ones who have the memory and skill necessary to be able to work together in hard times.

The goal of the Senior Center is not to get bigger and more costly. We would rather measure growth in terms of the proliferation of local neighborhood networks of caring that make it possible for us to remain relatively small and streamlined. This frees us to do the work that only we can do - and hopefully to do it well.

What is that work? What is our mission? The first challenge is simply to describe clearly – and to help others to understand – what is going on. For most people, the very name “Senior Center” evokes images of a drop-in center where meals are served to elderly folks with cards and bingo on the side. It also conjures up images of a residential facility where old people come before moving into a nursing home. Many people cannot imagine themselves coming to the Center because they associate it with a certain image of being old as dependent and even poor.

The fact is that the reality no longer matches these lingering images. Let me say that I see nothing inherently wrong with meals, games, or nursing homes, though we need to do better in these areas. The fact is, however, that the numbers of people who come here for meals is very small, while the work of the Center has expanded into many areas of service, education, and community building. To “come to the Center” may mean coming to 7 Main Street, but it might be for any number of vibrant events, meetings, classes, and activities that involve not only elders, but also children and adults of every age group. And we are indeed in the process of revamping our meals program to make it more appealing to everyone.

But to “come to the Center” also can have a figurative meaning. It may mean joining in a multi-generational program at the Colrain Central School or a helping with a Warming

Center in Ashfield. It may mean simply getting to know an older neighbor who needs an advocate or some companionship – and discovering a whole world of experience and wisdom that leaves you feeling that you’ve received more than you’ve given.

This is the essential mission of the Center – to act as leaven in the bread of our common life so that new friendships can take root and grow between generations and among neighbors. And out of these connections will come initiatives and programs that will truly be “of, by, and for” our elders and our towns.

The work of friendship making has three key components. Our first priority is to provide a leadership role in West County for *discerning the needs* of people as they age. This is the work of Deep Listening.

The next priority is to *provide the skills and knowledge necessary to develop and launch programs* in the community that can best serve those needs. We do not see the need to administer these programs directly; they can be semi-autonomous projects each with its own funding source and staff. They may range from a school-based multi-generational initiative to the creation of a community-owned nursing home.

Finally, we will continue to grow as *a place of radical hospitality and as an educational center* where seniors can grow in wisdom and inner strength.

We are not and do not wish to become, an “agency”; FCHCC and others do that better than we could ever hope to. We don’t need a big budget and a huge staff; we already have the skilled and dedicated staff we need. What we are looking for are friends to join the Friends - people who can help develop new ways to raise money in support of our mission. It is not for the Center or its staff; it is for all of us. It is a gesture of hope and new possibility in challenging times.

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