

Helen Dennis: 'Village' concept at work at Westchester Playa, Pasadena sites

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Last week we provided an overview of the Village concept in response to the question from A.W. who wants to remain in her home. This week we describe two Villages in our communities.

The first is the 3-year-old Westchester Playa Village that includes Westchester, Playa Del Rey, Playa Vista, Marina Del Rey, Ladera Heights, Culver City and possibly El Segundo.

Members who have joined the Village want to remain in their homes and stay engaged in their communities where they have lived for many years, according to executive director Carol Kitabayashi. In less than a year, its membership tripled to 45 with almost 80 individuals participating as volunteers ranging from high school students to retirees. The membership fee is \$500 a year; a household fee is \$750. Most members are in their 70s and 80s, female and many are without children or partners.

The typical member has lost the ability to drive safely and needs transportation to doctor appointments, shopping, hair appointments, church and social engagements.

One of the Village's greatest challenges is providing adequate transportation during the week and on weekends and recruiting volunteer drivers. Members who can drive still want to be part of the Village for the social activities, health and wellness programs and other educational opportunities. A bonus

for everyone is the new friendships that are formed.

Kitabayashi notes that the Village has become an extension of family. She consults with members' adult children who live out of state or miles away. These adult children are concerned about their parents, looking for support and are appreciative when finding it. "You're like the sister I never had in the way you are helping my mom and me," said an adult child to Kitabayashi.

Her greatest pleasure is helping older adults with basic tasks that can become difficult with age as well as providing them with opportunities to contribute and give back. To learn more, go to <http://thewpv.clubexpress.com/> or call 310-695-7030.

The Pasadena Village encompasses the greater Pasadena area, Sierra Madre, San Marino and Altadena. It also provides friendship, volunteer opportunities and helpful services that allow members to continue to live independently without feeling isolated.

Services range from computer help, driving to an appointment, assisting with a household task to needing a light bulb changed and walking Fido.

Less than a year old, it consists of 85 members composed of about 20 couples and 40 single individuals, mostly women. The majority are joining for companionship while looking ahead to a time when they may become less independent.

The fee for a single member is \$720 a year; for a couple it is \$960. Low-income members earning less than \$28,000 annually pay \$120 a year. About 15 percent of Pasadena's members fall into this category.

Membership includes services volunteered by Village members such as a ride to a medical appointment, grocery store or a visit to a friend. If one needs a

professional such as a licensed home health-care person or plumber, the Village recommends someone who has been screened. Membership also provides opportunities to socialize and volunteer.

Kujawa loves seeing people make new friends and connecting to one another. She also sees real struggles of members with Parkinson's disease and those who are recently widowed. "They are brave (individuals), reaching out to one another and looking ahead," Kujawa said.

John Orr, a retired USC professor, and his wife Thelma, a retired physical therapist, are recent members of the Pasadena Village. Confronted with a serious health problem, they realized that "health fortunes can quickly change," said Orr. He added: "What is most attractive is our access to relationships and friendships with those who have shared interests. It's a miracle for us, and we are most grateful."

A.W., if you are interested in joining an existing Village or starting one, go to the Village to Village Network web site at vtnetwork.org. It is a valuable resource.

Thank you for asking an important question. Each Village is different, offering a new and exciting option for what has traditionally been called retirement living. The Village concept brings new meaning to that term - with an emphasis on independence, contribution, aging in place and the creation of a vibrant community. As Kitabayashi says, "it's the wave of the future. "

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