

MEET A MEMBER



SUSAN MCWHINNEY- MORSE

A Founder's Vision Fulfilled

Two decades ago, Susan McWhinney-Morse invited a group of neighbors to her home in Beacon Hill. They were an eclectic bunch: an entrepreneur and an architect, a business executive and a social worker, a non-profit consultant and several artists. But their professions didn't matter says Susan, a former communications specialist. "What mattered was how we thought and what we wanted to do with our lives as we grew older."

The informal think tank had individually experienced issues with their parents' aging. "All were fraught with negativity and based on the concept of 'move away,'" says Susan. Some involved care facilities and others the trend of selling the family home and moving to a good climate away from loved ones. Susan's mother lived in her own house where she died at 103. "But she was incredibly lonely," she recalls.

Susan and her group—all actively involved in community pursuits—were determined to take control of their own futures while remaining rooted in their neighborhoods. According to Susan, who has lived in her Beacon Hill home for 50 years, "It used to be: collect your social security check and check out your brain. But that's nuts. Many of our original founders were 65 and on top of their game. We wanted to continue living active lifestyles, while recognizing that there may be periods when we'd need help."

The group identified areas integral to lifetime health and happiness and likely to foster friendships. Their in-depth study uncovered nearby resources to stimulate the mind, keep bodies healthy and enrich the soul. "There was no reason to leave Beacon Hill. Everything we needed was close by," says Susan. A questionnaire was sent to 450 Beacon Hill residents. It revealed that people wanted to stay in their homes as they aged. "We knew we were on to something," says Susan of the unanimous response. Her original group established Beacon Hill Village as a non-profit organization. They formed a board of directors and hired staff to help coordinate access to community resources.

At Beacon Hill Village's first community meeting, Susan says she was nervous as she addressed the room. "I stood up and said, 'We're attempting to solve the problem of aging and this is what we want to do.'" Sixty people signed up for memberships that same night. It was dazzling."

What challenges did Beacon Hill Village face as a pioneer of the aging-in-place movement?

Professional organizations, social workers, etc. were extremely critical of what we were doing. They were skeptical that we could care for ourselves without supervision and guidance which were best found in continuing care retirement communities, assisted living facilities, nursing homes or through programs run by state and federal agencies created specifically to care for the aging population.

How has Beacon Hill Village and Villages across the world changed the way people think about aging?

The success of the Village Movement is greatly changing the long-held concept that retired people naturally become passive participants in their own lives either by choice and/or infirmities. That we continue to be vibrant, contributing and informed members of society is what is so exciting about the village concept.

Has it been gratifying watching the idea of “social capital” evolve at BHV?

It's been amazing, but it's really just common sense. Our Village uses member skills to make the organization work. We need a treasurer and someone with those skills steps up. We need people who know people so interesting lectures can happen. We need people who can write. And on it goes.

What was the first initiative of Beacon Hill Village?

We formed a Program Committee that has become an exceptional group who create engaging and fun activities full of information. Today, we have a “Living Well, Ending Well” series focusing on tough topics people often don't want to talk about. It's been extraordinarily popular.

What are the benefits of joining a group or attending an event, activity or trip?

The initial reason for joining a group or attending an event becomes the foundation for tight friendships. In our affinity groups, people come together over shared interests. When the politics group was proposed, I wasn't sure it would work. Yet, it's turned out to be an amazing group, now in its eleventh year. Members have formed a personal support group for one another beyond just talking politics.

Does income play a role in Villages?

No, it doesn't. This is the cheapest, most common sense way of taking care of an older population. Everyone is welcome and everyone pitches in, keeping costs low. It's a simple concept of getting people together to share their expertise and caring. Involvement makes you feel worthwhile and that's invaluable.

What has the Village meant to you personally?

To start a Village and work in a Village has been the most fascinating thing I've ever done—engrossing and rewarding beyond measure. A year ago, I had pneumonia and everyone brought me food. That kind of support in little ways and big ways is automatic in the Village. It's at the heart of what we do.