

SONOMA SENIORS TODAY

Intergenerational Interaction

By Laurie Wachter, Editor

One-quarter of all Sonoma County residents are 60 or older. And, while the population in the county has grown 4% since 2010, adults 60 or older have increased at a much faster rate of 33%. With a growth rate that high, it's no surprise that greater attention is being focused on making the County more livable for seniors.

Terry Kemp, LVN, Director of Resident Services at Healdsburg Senior Living, sits on the Age-Friendly Sonoma County Steering Committee and Healdsburg's Senior Citizens Advisory Commission. Terry says "Healdsburg, Sonoma County and Council on Aging (COA) are running on parallel paths" to achieve this goal.

8 Domains of Livability



Community-based Health, Mental Health and Social Services An age-friendly community cares for its older adults, helps them care for themselves and feel safe in their homes and out in the community.



Community Connectedness, Respect and Inclusion An age-friendly community listens to, respects and includes older adults in community activities and decision-making processes.



Housing An age-friendly community has varied housing options.



Transportation An age-friendly community has ways for older people and non-drivers to get where they need to go.



Outdoor Spaces and Buildings An age-friendly community provides easy access to its public spaces, indoor and out.



Social/Civic Participation and Employment An age-friendly community provides ways for older adults to stay actively engaged in community life.



Communication and Information An age-friendly community helps residents access the information they need.



Lifelong Learning An age-friendly community provides ongoing opportunities for learning and exploration, especially those that are community-based, low or no cost and easily accessible.

Age-Friendly Healdsburg

Sonoma County has had its age-friendly designation since 2016 and now Healdsburg is applying to become the first city in the county to gain an age-friendly designation. Anna Grant, Healdsburg's Active Adult and Senior Services Supervisor and staff liaison to the Senior Citizens Advisory Commission, says "What's really unique in Healdsburg is the support we get from the community. Everyone's on board." She adds that they plan to celebrate their new designation by taking the traditional senior potluck brunch out onto the Plaza, Healdsburg's favorite gathering place, for all ages to participate.

A recent Age-Friendly Sonoma Needs Assessment found that residents of all ages wanting more interactions across generations. Their ideas cut across the 8 Domains of Livability (see sidebar). They believed multi-generational housing and activities bringing youth and seniors together in a mutually beneficial way would increase socialization and respect for seniors and decrease isolation and the stigma associated with aging.

Comm-University

As the Age-Friendly initiative was getting up and running, a movement of like-minded people in Healdsburg were creating just such an intergenerational interaction program. It began when a local couple brought the film "Alive Inside", which had won the audience award at the Sundance Film Festival, to Healdsburg. The film showed that, when music was matched to the life experience of a senior with Alzheimer's or dementia and played to them through headsets, they began connecting with the people around them. The film was so emotionally powerful that Healdsburg residents spontaneously donated over \$40,000 that night.

For Tony Fisher, the head of Marketing/Community Relations at Healdsburg Senior Living (HSL), it was the beginning of an intergenerational program that has evolved into Comm-University and now links 200-300 students, from 3-years-old to seniors, from 11 local schools each month with HSL residents. The students participate in project-based learning across a diverse curriculum of plant science and horticulture, reading and writing, music and science.



Comm-University student Zack Reed connecting with a Healdsburg Senior Living resident.

Tony has pictures of these kids with elders that are so powerful because they show "that human connection, looking into each other's eyes, holding their hands." He tells me, "It's easy to think, 'What can you do?' One woman had advanced dementia and in this photo she's sitting with Zack Reed from Healdsburg School. She's looking into his eyes. No one told him to hold her hand and look into her eyes. He knew instinctually. That picture has touched people all over the nation. She couldn't even articulate a sentence. She couldn't say what her name was or what she had for breakfast. Then Zack put the music together and put the headset on her and he began to learn about her life. He found that she used to live in Alexander Valley and loved to garden. The music enabled her to connect with him and to communicate."

Community and connection

The world-wide Age-Friendly movement is creating pathways to build a community that's senior friendly, one that improves the environment and accessibility and increases the community's understanding of aging. Comm-University adds young people to these often adults-only conversations by giving them direct experience with seniors. The dramatic positive change in their perception of aging from before they participate in the program to after illustrates the power of human connection.

For more information on the Age-Friendly initiative in Sonoma County and Healdsburg, contact Renee Tolliver at 525-0143, ext.124.

For more information on Comm-University, contact Tony Fisher at 657-4056.

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