

Older and Wiser: Dispelling myths is a great way to celebrate seniors

BC Seniors Week runs June 5-11, and it marks a time for celebration and appreciation of the contributions seniors make, writes columnist Margaret Coates.

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Residents of Summerhill PARC senior living community in North Vancouver take part in chair yoga , one of the health initiatives for residents. BC Seniors week runs June 5-11, celebrating all things senior. Paul McGrath, North Shore News

BC Seniors Week is June 5 to 11. On the BC's Seniors Advocate website it says, "This is a time to celebrate seniors and their many contributions." The site also says that "This time provides an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the integral part seniors play in communities across British Columbia."

There are many ways we can celebrate seniors this week and every week. We can celebrate with events and activities which I believe many North Shore organizations are offering.

But to my mind as a senior, I would like people to reject several myths about seniors that are simply not accurate. These myths often diminish the reality of seniors as major contributors to our community, both historically and in the present.

One of the major myths I hear a great deal is that seniors are not productive in society. Though seniors are not necessarily in paid work (although that has changed over the years), they lend their support to the community by volunteering countless hours. In fact, seniors contribute the most volunteer hours in Canada as a group. They also volunteer as unpaid caregivers to friends and family, saving the economy many thousands of health care dollars. Seniors also pay taxes and are consumers of goods and services.

Another myth about older people is that most are well heeled with lots of money for travelling and other expensive activities. Many seniors are certainly not wealthy. In fact, statistics suggest the rate of poverty in the seniors' population is increasing. Seniors may not have a private pension or retirement savings to carry them through their senior years. Some seniors are forced to take up part-time work to stretch their incomes – especially now with increasing inflation.

On the North Shore, a review of seniors at risk by Hollyburn Family Services Society showed that more than 1,200 seniors are living below the low-income cut-off and spend more than half of their income on housing. It also found there are hidden group of seniors who, until they collide with the system, are living in substandard housing or are homeless.

Notwithstanding the myths about seniors, there are some complex issues that many face, and without community support, they may be at risk for increased negative health and wellness issues, loneliness, isolation, poverty, poor housing options and elder abuse. Older people who are socially connected and participate in their communities are more likely to obtain the help they need to mitigate these issues. Communities must provide the supports seniors need, while at the same time not stereotyping them. Social stigmatization or stereotyping of older adults further reduces their access to services and opportunities.

Seniors are not a homogeneous group. There are as many types and varieties in the seniors population as there are in younger age groups. In a report on social isolation, a Canadian government website says that, "Far from being a homogeneous group, Canadian seniors have multiple identities and experience different life circumstances that make broad generalizations problematic."

It appears at times that the contributions of seniors historically have been overlooked. People sometimes forget that seniors contributed to building this country and community. Seniors contributed to the economic growth of their communities through their paid work, taxes, and their contributions to culture and Canadian values. They created systems and organizations such as universities and schools which help all Canadians live better lives. It is clear to me that seniors contribute to the fabric of our community.

So how can we celebrate seniors and elders? At the Squamish Nation Elders Centre on the North Shore, they are celebrating Indigenous History month in which many activities are being planned for their Elders. Celebrating connection to community is vital. As two Squamish members of the Nation, Sandra Jacobs and Evangeline Nahanee say, "The Squamish word Nch'ú7mut, pronounced 'in-cho-moot,' means: to be coming together as one, unity, or to be one piece of

something greater. During the month of June and all other months, their way of working with their community is through Nch'ú7mut as it is important to stay connected and be in unity to all aspects of the community as whole."

Two other events celebrating seniors week in June include a play and a film about transportation for seniors. Inaccessible transportation is another issue for seniors who need to access services, especially on our hilly North Shore. On June 10 starting at 1 p.m. at Silver Harbour Centre, BEST (Better Environmentally Sound Transportation) will show their documentary film ROVING, an exploration in transportation alternatives for seniors, produced in partnership with TransLink. There will also be a special matinée showing of Driving Me Crazy on Friday, June 17, at Presentation House Theatre. The matinée will include a public conversation about transportation for seniors. Finally, throughout June, try your nearest seniors centre to access a fun celebration of seniors.

I do not think I can say it enough: seniors deserve our thanks for all that they have contributed to our community.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 51 years and has worked for and with seniors for 26 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome – email lions_view@telus.net.