
THE DUPONT CURRENT

Wednesday, October 19, 2016

Serving Dupont Circle, Kalorama, Adams Morgan & Logan Circle

Vol. XV, No. 21

Local villages aim to expand appeal to a broader age range

■ **Seniors:** Nonprofits offer access to local social events

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The Dupont Circle Village — one of several groups across the city that help older residents age in place by providing services and social activities — has launched two new programs to expand its reach to a slightly younger population. Meanwhile, comparable organizations across Northwest have also been recognizing the value of that goal in recent years.

Earlier this year, Dupont's village announced Next Gen 2.0, a program geared largely toward residents between 50 and 65 years old, who generally don't feel they need the village's services but still want to participate socially. Village board member and former president Iris Molotsky told *The Current* that the program, which has already gathered nearly 25 members, was born out of a desire to incorporate the neighborhood's younger aging population into its activities.

"We really should be unified in our concern and wanting to enrich
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VILLAGES: Dupont group offers new initiatives to add younger members

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and keep the community vibrant,” Molotsky said. “It grew out of the idea that we all are invested in making our community work.”

Board member Mary McIntosh initially proposed the idea to help boost the organization’s enrollment numbers. As the project developed, though, she realized that the more lasting benefits would be uniting disparate factions in the community.

“I’m not seeing this as a way to increase membership in the village, but more to serve a need that’s out there, and more importantly have that next generation that will keep this movement alive,” McIntosh said.

The Next Gen group, whose participants are full-fledged members of the village, now represents the fastest growing segment of the village’s population, according to Molotsky. Some members stick to the village’s social events, while others have engaged in volunteering and other philanthropy. The Next Gen group on the whole also has a higher degree of tech savvy, Molotsky said, which helps forge connections with older members.

“They like the idea of the village,” she said of the new members. “They’re aging. They’re not old yet; they don’t need somebody

to drive them to a doctor’s office. But they know plenty of people who do. This is a way that they can be part of the movement and part of the village.”

Events specific to the Next Gen group have included “deep dives” into a particular culture’s culinary offerings, movie and theater nights, and wine tastings, McIntosh said. Unlike the broader village events, Next Gen gatherings don’t take place during the workday, in an effort to cater to many of the members’ tight schedules.

McIntosh hopes to see the program grow over time. “It’s been evolving organically,” she said.

Meanwhile, earlier this year the Dupont village also started a group called the “Friends of Dupont Circle Village.” It’s comprised mainly of interested observers — whether from the neighborhood or elsewhere in the city — whom Molotsky describes as “not ready yet” for official village membership. Their main role is to support the organization, as with fundraising events like a wine tasting at the Slovenian Embassy that will be held Oct. 25.

The Dupont village isn’t the only one with an eye on expanding its member base.

Andrea Saccoccia, executive director of the Palisades Village, said that her organization has been

reaching out to younger people for the last year and a half, with the goal of forging bonds that will carry over once people reach village membership age.

“We engage people when they’re young so they can see the value of our organization. If they volunteer or become associate members, they’re partaking in their community,” Saccoccia said. “Hopefully when they need our services, they can convert over.”

And over at the Foggy Bottom West End Village, leaders have been planning events with younger residents in mind. A walk in the local dog park this Saturday represents one effort, while others include jazz concerts, a comedy event and an annual gala featuring samples from local restaurants, according to Lorna Grenadier of the group’s board of directors.

The Northwest Neighbors Village offers an associate member option for residents who aren’t quite ready to commit to a full membership, according to executive director Stephanie Chong. Associate members can participate in village events and take advantage of referrals to professional providers but cannot request the services of a volunteer. Opening the village — serving areas including Chevy Chase, Tenleytown, Friendship Heights and Forest

Hills — to younger participants helps spread word about the organization to people who might have never known about it, she said.

One of the goals of these efforts, village leaders say, is to keep the groups thriving for years to come. Getting involved earlier also offers benefits for the prospective member, according to Georgetown Village executive director Lynn Golub-Rofrano. She recalls one instance in which a younger member had declined to join the organization because she didn’t think she needed it. Then she collapsed at work and realized the village could help her after all.

“We had to go back to square one to get her registered as a member and get to know her,” Golub-Rofrano said. “Young members who are already members, we know them, they know us.”

The Georgetown organization offers cheaper “social memberships” for younger residents who aren’t yet in need of services.

The overriding theme of the villages is to help ease and enhance the natural transitions of aging.

“None of us wants to be in age-segregated communities,” Molotsky said. “We may still be working, but even if we retire, we don’t want to sit home in rocking chairs and not be active. We really want to be part of the community.”