

FEATURED

## Love Living at Home Turns One

By Matt Butler 33 min ago



From left to right: Mayor Svante Myrick, Love Living at Home founders Leslie and Jim Quest and Kathy Garner, Executive Director Elena Flash, Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce's Jennifer Tavares and Gary Ferguson of the Downtown Ithaca Alliance.

Photo provided

With a growing aging population, and the vast majority of that population wanting to stay in their homes later in life, Tompkins County will need all the help it can get in the near future to handle the influx of retirees as the Baby Boomer generation exits the workforce.

While a litany of organizations are around to cater to the elderly, non-profit Love Living at Home takes a slightly different approach than the conventional services provided. Dedicated to facilitating independence and relationships during a potentially isolated time in life, the local organization that celebrates its one year anniversary in October has 117 members currently enrolled.

Tompkins County's Office for the Aging states that 90 percent of the age-65 plus population says they "hope to stay in their homes as long as possible." While Love Living at Home provides services for home life, it's also based on the principle that helping people engage with others is a vital part of life even, and maybe especially, during its later years.

Ironically, the program simultaneously helps people stay in their home while getting out of the house.

n and Leslie Quest, along with Kathy Garner, founded the organization last year after a few years of planning, originally inspired by a report on NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams about the concept of aging in place (essentially what Love Living at Home is based upon). Executive Director Elena Flash said their membership growth was brisk at the beginning but has slowed a bit, though they are above national average membership still. Their mission can be a tough one to explain, Flash acknowledged, and can be even tougher to sell to older people who might already be subscribed to a routine. But Flash is confident that if someone gives Love Living at Home a shot, their quality of life will improve.

"As folks age and people move closer to or into retirement, your social circle gets a lot smaller very quickly," she said. "Replacing those becomes very important in order to preserve your health and well-being. People who were working and had a lot to contribute now have a new place to do it in a place that is very grassroots."

The breadth of their activities is pretty expansive, from tailgating a Cornell football game to weekly happy hours to local events, anything to allow members the chance to get out and socialize. Their "Behind the Scenes" tours involve going somewhere notable in the community, like Finger Lakes ReUse or the Tompkins County Dispatch Center, and getting an inside look at the facility and its operations. Secondly, Love Living at Home provides a volunteer network, some old and some young, who are deployed for a variety of services to organization members' homes, like changing a lightbulb or giving a ride to an appointment.

Part of the difficulty in attracting people to the program comes from what Flash calls a "fierce independence"; people who want to live alone as they age are naturally less likely to want to ask for help or guidance when necessary. Of course, that sometimes leads to more profound issues that, while problematic throughout life, can become exacerbated for seniors.

Flash names the three most difficult challenges faced during the aging process as loneliness, boredom and helplessness. Love Living at Home employs the Village Model, a specific way to provide aging at home services that doesn't only serve members but connects them to others. By virtue of that, the programs serve to address the challenges without being too invasive.

Aging, Flash said, can be an unfortunate exercise in increasing isolation; when someone stops working due to retirement or otherwise, that can eliminate a significant amount of the human interaction one naturally encounters on a daily basis. It's a crucial part of life, Flash said, and to avoid replacing those experiences is counterproductive.

"Hands down, the number one best way to keep your mental acuity sharp and battle dementia is making new friends, it's through relationships," Flash said. "You may think it's crosswords, but it's meeting new people."

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