

Elderly neighbors help each other stay in their homes

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by [Elizabeth Floyd Mair](#)

ALBANY COUNTY — “We women never touch a flake of snow,” said Joan Sherwood. “The guys here are amazing. They come over and knock on the door and say, ‘Keys?’ We hand over our keys, and they go down and scrape off our cars, and move them so the snowplows can get through.”

She was referring not to staff but to the men, elderly residents themselves, who also live in Livingston School Apartments on Albany’s Northern Boulevard and are members of the Livingston Village.

Livingston School Apartments, a two-year-old apartment complex for people aged 55 and older, located in the former Livingston Middle School, is home to one the few local examples of a movement that is growing nationwide, called “the village movement.” In this movement, founders of a village create a not-for-profit organization whose members will help one another remain in their homes as they age by providing one another with services, activities, and social connection.

Ken Harris, executive director of the Albany Guardian Society, a not-for-profit dedicated to helping older people, said that Livingston Village is unusual because it is an example of a village started in a moderate-income apartment building. Most “villages” allow residents to age in place, in the homes they have long inhabited.

The Albany Guardian Society has been supporting the village movement and letting people know about the village option for several years, Harris said.

In Bethlehem, a village called Bethlehem Neighbors was formed in the Colonial Acres neighborhood, secured not-for-profit status, and offered book clubs and other activities, but members said recently that it is now reorganizing in hopes of becoming more sustainable, and declined to speak for this story.

The other closest examples of villages are in Glens Falls and Rhinebeck.

Livingston Village



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Family: Joan Sherwood, right, explained that, ever since her husband died 11 years earlier, she had been “bouncing around” from one living situation to another. She moved into Livingston School Apartments when it opened two years ago and has become very close with fellow resident Rachael Ellis, left.

Livingston Village members Rachael Ellis and Joan Sherwood have become close over the two-plus years that they have lived in apartments that once served as middle-school classrooms.

Ellis is not originally from the Capital District; she and her daughters followed Ellis's son to the area from Queens. "We're not leaving, any of us," she said. "We like it."

Ellis lived for a time in Ohav Sholom, on Krumkill Road, but, she says, "I found they did not have activities. To me, they weren't as open, friendly, as we are here."

Joan Sherwood, who had lived with her husband in Albany, "bounced around" from one living situation to another after he died 11 years ago. She spent a year at Diamond Ridge in Lansingburgh, which she said was independent living with meals provided. She said, "It got to be more of a nursing home than anything else, and I said, 'No!'"



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Old building, new use: The stately former Livingston Middle School on Northern Boulevard in Albany was transformed two years ago into independent-living senior apartments. About 20 of its residents also belong to the not-for-profit Livingston Village; its members provide services and friendship to help one another remain independent.

Sherwood moved into Livingston School Apartments when it first opened and has since become very close with Ellis, who moved in a few months later.

"She's not going anywhere now," said Ellis of Sherwood.

"At least not without Rachael," replied Sherwood.

“Sisters from another mother,” Ellis said.

Outings are sometimes planned, with members going apple-picking, or to the Lights in the Park at Christmastime. There are holiday parties at Christmas or New Year’s. Last year, for St. Patrick’s Day, Sherwood made eight rounds of corned beef, she said.

Members cook shared dinners together when they feel like it, the women said. “We might decide on a Friday, let’s do a fish fry tonight,” Sherwood said.

If Sherwood goes away for a couple of days, she doesn’t have to ask: Ellis feeds her two cats. A number of residents have cats, and some have dogs — “ankle-biters,” the women said, clearly preferring cats.

Several residents helped Sherwood’s son recently move in a large wooden armoire she had had in storage. Another resident, who knows how to fix cars, often helps other people with small repairs, free of charge.

All of the outer doors are kept locked. “We don’t let anybody in,” said Ellis. If people come and say they want to go to the office, residents go to the office and let them know, rather than opening the door.



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Occasional events: As part of a six-week series, personal trainer Heather Coleman, standing at right, talks with members of Livingston Village about the effect of exercise on body and spirit and distributes her business cards.

Officer Justin Wallace from the Albany Police Department comes by to check on residents, the women said. He’s not assigned to the building, but to the area, they said. “He’ll come by and walk the halls and make sure everything’s OK,” said Sherwood. Ellis added, “And he has a nose for our food!”

Sherwood and a number of other residents meet outside every morning at 6 a.m. and walk together.

Livingston Village operates as a partnership with Senior Services of Albany, which will arrange transportation for residents, if needed.

“The whole idea for us to be in here is to do a village,” said Krista Harbacz of Senior Services of Albany, explaining that what the agency already had in place seemed a good fit with starting a village.

The building has 103 apartments, most of which are full, Harbacz said.

Members pay \$10 a month in dues. Their monthly rent is determined on a sliding scale based on income, including assets. Sherwood’s rent is \$865, and Ellis’s is \$722.

“We basically have the same apartment,” Ellis said. Each has one bedroom, an L-shaped kitchen, a large bathroom, and 15-foot ceilings throughout. The building also has studio and two-bedroom apartments.

Each of their one-bedroom apartments has a chalkboard built into one wall. “My blackboard is full because my nieces and nephews write all over it,” said Ellis. “I erase nothing! I read it every night,” she added.

“It’s a nice conversation piece,” Ellis said.

Sherwood, who paints and makes greetings cards that she sells at craft fairs as well as flower arrangements, has paintings leaning on her chalkboard, with the trays meant to hold chalk serving as the base of the easel.

On a recent Thursday evening, the 20 or so residents who came to an event that was part of a series called “Exercise and You” first ate a buffet-style dinner of stroganoff and noodles.

Harbacz then reminded them about some of the tips they had heard the week before, about improving sleep, and asked if anyone had tried them. People began to call out things they had tried and that had helped: wearing an eye mask, turning off the television set before lying down, and playing soothing music.

Personal trainer Heather Coleman then discussed exercise and its effect on body and spirit.

Coleman talked about the importance of exercise in preventing injury and reducing pain. She gave them tips about ways they could easily incorporate more exercise and strength training into their daily lives, such as doing a few lifting repetitions with a water bottle before opening it. She talked about the benefits of taking time to meditate, and, when feeling stress, “sitting down and doing nothing.”





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Sharing a meal: Most of the Livingston Village's 20 members have gathered to share a meal on a Thursday evening prior to a talk on exercise and meditation.

Organizations that can help

Locally, the existing not-for-profit organization Community Caregivers, headquartered in Westmere, already performs many of the same functions that a village would — helping older people stay in their homes by providing them with assistance as needed, such as occasional friendly visits or rides to a doctor or grocery store.

“I like to say that Community Caregivers is a village, except we predate the movement, and there’s no membership fee,” said Michael Burgess, health consultant to the organization. Burgess was formerly the director of the New York State Office for Aging.

Burgess said that Community Caregivers is happy to partner with any local organization that starts a village.

Community Caregivers has a base of about 150 volunteers and a system already set up to help people who need services, said Outreach and Education Coordinator Linda Miller. That infrastructure takes time to create, she said, adding that the organization would like to see villages form in the immediate area and would be happy to partner with them.

Harris of the Albany Guardian Society said that it usually takes five to 10 dedicated people to get a village going and make it successful. It takes a couple of years to get it off the ground, he said, including filing as a not-for-profit organization and educating people in the community about the benefits.

Harris said it’s a neighbor-helping-neighbor concept. “A lot of the activities are to help people age in place: transportation, home repairs, and social activities.” Older people can

sometimes be isolated and alone, he said, “and that really affects people’s physical and mental health.”

The creation of villages in a community “can be like a domino effect,” Harris said, noting that there are 58 villages in Washington, D.C.

“We’re hoping to get government support for this,” said Harris.

A fledgling organization in Guilderland, called Guilderland Cares, is working to put together a directory of services that are available for “the elderly, people with disabilities, and anybody with a need,” said town Supervisor Peter Barber.

The group meets about once a month at the library and comprises representatives of local government, the Guilderland Food Pantry, the YMCA, the Guilderland Public Library, and various churches, Barber said.

A village is a bit like a co-op, said Burgess of Community Caregivers, because people who are members also volunteer their time.

The real key, Burgess said, is to keep older people from feeling isolated and to provide them with assurance that they wouldn’t be alone if they needed something.

Burgess said that Community Caregivers views Guilderland Cares as “a potential way for a village movement to get going in Guilderland.”

Clarified on Nov. 17, 2017: The phrase "when feeling stress" was added to provide context to Heather Coleman's description of meditation as a contrast to "sitting down and doing nothing."

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