

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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Canopy of Neighbors

Combining social services and volunteerism to form community



A Global View of Social Work

Hope & Joy

Joyelle Tedeschi, MSW '08, realizes youthful vision of helping community in the Matt Urban Center



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CANOOPY OF NEIGHBORS

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Canopy of Neighbors is personal for Toby Laping, PhD, LMSW '63.

In 2010, Laping, now 75, was sailing with a group of close friends —the conversation turned to the inevitability of aging and where and how they themselves might like to live.

Cut to December 2011: Canopy of Neighbors launched as a non-profit member-based organization whose mission is “to give subscribers practical means and confidence to remain in their own homes as they grow older, to link them with resources to help them age in place.” It now has about 110 members and a bank of volunteers.

Canopy enrolls members and recruits volunteers, connecting the two. Members must live in the city of Buffalo’s west side, and in return for paying an annual subscription fee, they receive access to a bank of volunteers and resources; when possible and appropriate, members themselves are encouraged to volunteer.

“One force behind forming [Canopy of Neighbors] is that our culture thinks that it knows what’s best for seniors,” explains Laping. “Society says to them, ‘If you can’t manage at home any more, it’s time to move to assisted living.’ Or, ‘You need healthcare delivered to you at home,’ even if they don’t need it.

“Canopy of Neighbors is a work in progress. It’s part of an expanding, national ‘village-to-village network,’ each of which is making a significant contribution to make it easier for people to stay at home.”

The program combines flexibility, community-based structure and affordability by effectively challenging assumptions about the needs of aging Americans. Laping, a geriatric care manager with a doctorate in public policy, is a consultant at Laping, Surdej Associates, LLC. She has been affiliated with the faculties of University at Buffalo’s Medical School, Division of Geriatrics and the Graduate School of Social Work.

Canopy aims to empower individuals — volunteers don’t just drop off and pick up at the curb. They fill needs which otherwise might go unfilled or be provided by vendors like taxi drivers, handymen or housecleaners. Services can include errands, like a ride to the grocery store, sharing meals, or helping with household tasks and paperwork. Canopy also socially engages aging adults in informal breakfasts and lunches; diverse members and volunteers gather to share their unique hobbies in yoga classes, writing workshops or crafting groups.

Athalie Joy, PhD, is a Canopy of Neighbors member, volunteer and board member. A clinical psychologist for over 30 years, she and her husband, Peter Gold,

both 73, joined the organization as soon as they moved into the downtown Buffalo area. She is engaged with the social side of Canopy, programming events, scheduling classes and working to foster engagement.

“We’re interested in the notion of Canopy helping people maintain themselves in their own residences as long as possible — with active, close-knit connections,” Joy says. “Our hope and expectation is that Canopy will be less of a service agency and more of a community.”

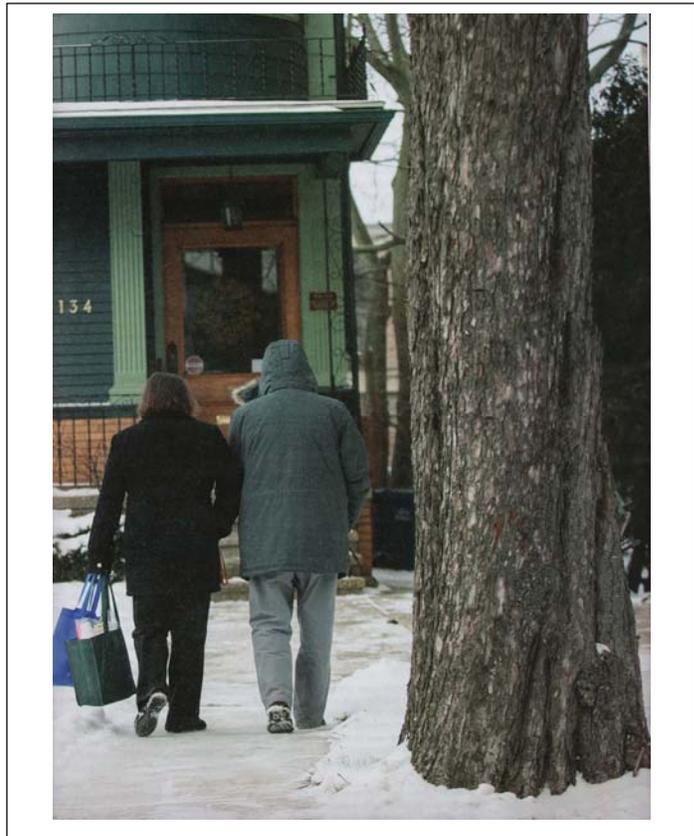
“Part of the challenge is that our culture’s well-developed models are based on social work and social services — doing things for people. The ‘we do things together’ model is not as comfortable or familiar; so it takes time.”

Laping adds, “A group like Canopy has the potential to work compatibly with the Affordable Care Act, helping people to stay out of hospitals, providing cost-effective support services instead of bricks and mortar.”

“It helps older people avoid institutionalization; it has the potential to reduce isolation by providing residents with social connections and the opportunity to become involved in community. Obtaining essential supportive services can be difficult and costly. With Canopy’s services and support, older adults can maintain their autonomy, health and quality of life as they age,” explains Louanne Bakk, PhD, an assistant professor and director of the School of Social Work’s Institute on Innovative Aging Policy and Practice.

“Since 2011, an estimated 8,000 Americans turn 65 each day,” says Deborah Waldrop, LMSW, PhD, a professor and SSW associate dean for faculty development. Most express the wish to remain in their familiar environment, and innovative programs like Canopy of Neighbors make that possible. The program and its model are committed to older adults’ dignity and well-being — with a vision of what’s possible when people work together” ■

By Jana Eisenberg, a Buffalo-based freelance writer. Photography by Dylan Buyskes of Onion Studio Photography & Design.



IN HER OWN WORDS: BERTHA RHONE, CANOPY MEMBER

“I live in a high-rise senior building. I’m 78, and since I stopped driving myself, I had no way of getting to the doctor or to the grocery store. My two grown children live in Buffalo. They are busy, and also they don’t have transportation. My son calls me, and my daughter helps me on the weekends.

“Then I heard about Canopy of Neighbors. At the time, they had a scholarship program.

“When I heard I was accepted, I was so relieved to know that I didn’t have to worry about being able to get to the doctor and back home. I’m on a fixed income, so it was hard to find and pay for rides. Sometimes the Canopy volunteers come in with me; we sit and talk, or they will bring a book and read. It’s wonderful.

“I’ve been to their lunches a few times; we go to Quaker Bonnet on Allen Street. It’s nice — you socialize with a lot of different people, talk about so many things. It’s like Canopy has become a member of the family.

“Every so often, [a Canopy representative visits our facility] and tells us about classes and events. It’s so good to know that you can do stuff like that even though you’re older. It feels like you can do a lot of things that ordinarily you wouldn’t. They make you feel like you’re sort of young.”