

Knapp: Aging in Place: In the Neighborhood

By Guest Column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

Posted Feb 02, 2011 @ 12:00 PM

My little neighborhood has a medley of houses from three eras: Victorian – big, embellished, porches; post World War I – rectangular, no-nonsense adornments; and post World War II – practical, smaller. These houses are on streets that connect to other streets that lead to other neighborhoods. These are landmarks by which I orient myself each time I step outside. They are comfortingly familiar.

I know a few things about those who live in the houses around me – where there are young children, empty nesters, or slightly “elders” like me. In the past few years my neighborhood has blossomed with kids who live in houses made vacant by seniors who no longer wanted the responsibilities of maintaining a home. Both the houses and neighborhood have shifted from one generation to another and each change has generated gain and loss. While new neighbors ensure that houses are filled with future dreams, old connections can disappear leaving only fragile memories of what it was like in the past.

Since my street is only one block long, during the warm months kids are on the street with scant worry that cars will interrupt their play. From inside my house, I hear the thump, thump of the basketball on the pavement, the grinding sound of skateboards on sidewalks, and, sometimes, the unintelligible chatter of young girls deep in discussion in the next yard. These are sounds that tell me that people feel safe here.

I know that the people who live around me are kind and caring. I am asked to holiday parties and my grandchildren are invited to run under sprinklers when they are with me on hot summer days. My grandson loves to sit on a stone wall and watch the big kids shoot hoops. In discussions over our shared fence, my neighbor and I talk about complex and simple life issues: how to create a new path after retirement or the colors of our newly painted houses.

I have to admit I am a lazy neighbor and connect mainly with people whose houses I can see out my windows. It wasn’t until I went around with a flyer explaining my renovation plans that I met neighbors who lived here for as many years as I had but had never met. In my 20-minute foray to nearby streets I met an editor who gave me advice about publishing; learned about an upsetting land controversy; and heard stories about the difficulties of helping older people make decisions while avoiding intrusion into their private lives.

This last issue hits home for me. On the one hand I want to feel attached and connected to my neighbors; on the other hand I like my privacy. As a proud person, I especially don’t want people to be concerned that I need help when I see myself as an able, active, competent older adult. In thinking about this I realized I had to figure out how to handle this tug between openness and seclusion. My sustainability in the neighborhood depends on it.

Almost without realizing it, I have been drifting in the direction of disclosure. As I slowly learn about my neighbors, I have begun to share things about myself (sometimes, ironically, in a public way- through TAB articles). After “Aging in Place: Safe and Sound” (TAB, Sept. 22, 2010), my terrific neighbor across the street left a plant at my back door with a little note saying “We love having you in the neighborhood.” Can’t do much better than that!

Participating in a neighborhood takes work, especially when people are of different ages. Because of a common life stage, families with young children may have an easier time communicating with each other. Those without that shared experience may slip away from core neighborhood awareness. Since neighborhoods are dynamic, relationships can be hard to maintain. But if the notion of neighborliness is to succeed, then at least some of us must open ourselves up to sharing in a meaningful way. This idea got me thinking about what to do if I needed help with a household task. The first and hardest step would be to admit that I couldn’t do it myself. Yet, I realized, if I could figure out how to contribute back then it might be more acceptable to ask.

Having had this insight, I constructed a series of questions. What can I contribute to my neighborhood? What kind of help might I need? How do I communicate these “assets” and “needs” to my neighbors? How can they communicate with me? How do we help each other? There are no simple answers but the only way to figure out how to sustain our close-by relationships is to tackle the questions one by one and start talking to the people who live around us. We will learn something new and perhaps begin the process of knowing how to support each other, respectfully, in the neighborhood.

Other ideas? – e-mail me at marianknapp@gmail.com. In the meantime, if you need help with some household tasks call the Department of Senior Services, 617-796-1660.

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and care-giver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia”. She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a Commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging.

Copyright 2011 Newton TAB. Some rights reserved