

Somewhere to belong: Inside Our Place's 55+ Club

A daily coffee circle has grown into a community where seniors can find friendship, support and a reason to show up

The Times Colonist's recent feature on seniors facing homelessness made for hard reading. Recent counts in B.C. have found that a quarter of people experiencing homelessness are over 55 and almost half of that group became unhoused for the first time after reaching their senior years. Many are aging in shelters and supportive housing that were never designed with older adults in mind.

There's no single fix for challenges this big, but the article also pointed to a quieter danger. Seniors often lose their housing after changes that went unnoticed because they were isolated and no one saw things slipping. Loneliness doesn't just make hard times harder. It can also keep people from the help they need.

That's where Our Place's 55+ Club comes in.

It starts with coffee

Every weekday at 11 a.m., Kristen Sanborn, Our Place's social inclusion support worker for seniors, sets out coffee and treats. When she started she knew she wanted to fully embrace Our Place's core value of unconditional love.

"I walked in and went, all right, let's start with coffee and a muffin," she says.

Some days five people come, some days 25. The circle has become the club's touchstone, a place where members can talk about what's happening in their lives, hear about upcoming programs and notice when someone is missing.

"I feel like I'm not 69 anymore"

Val has been coming for over a year. At first it was simply about not being alone. "Or else I'd be sitting at home in my cave in the dark," she says. "I feel like I'm not 69 anymore. I'm like 45."

She never misses Monday Zumba



Mike, John and Val cherish their connections at Our Place's 55+ Club. PHOTO VIA OUR PLACE SOCIETY

with instructor Lisa. "It brings so much energy to the room," she says. "All day after, I'm just energized." She's made friends she now considers family and she's hoping to get her husband to join.

John has been coming since the building opened. Originally from Romania and living in Victoria since 1992, he's clear about why he comes. "I have food at home," he says. "I come here because I like people."

Mike, who works summers on the harbour, says his favourite lately has been the art program, where he recently painted a jewelry box for his girlfriend. He's also a regular at Zumba, yoga and Pilates.

Our Place sits on Pandora Avenue, a street many people in Victoria hurry past. The members of the 55+ Club walk it every day and none of them feel uneasy doing it.

Asked if they're ever nervous, John laughs.

"Oh God, no, not me."

Val puts it simply. "Everybody on this street has a story. Everybody

is a human. Everybody's got their problems. But you treat them with respect and dignity."

More than a social club

Around the morning circle, the club has built a full schedule. It includes activities such as Zumba, seated yoga, art therapy, massage therapy and twice-monthly accessible dance classes with Embrace Arts, a non-profit that brings arts and music to communities that don't often have access to them. A clinical psychologist has also led sessions and in October, hospice staff will lead a grief workshop.

There are outings too, like mini golf, a Chinatown tour, a picnic in the park and a trip to Tim Hortons, where 15 members took over the café.

"Getting people a couple of blocks away sometimes changes everything," says Sanborn. "Sometimes you forget there's a whole world."

Right now, members are rehearsing a Christmas show, complete with Santa, Mrs. Claus, reindeer and two Zumba numbers.

No one left behind

The club's work goes well beyond the social calendar. Staff help members work through financial barriers and government paperwork that can overwhelm anyone, including applications for Old Age Security and arranging doctor's appointments and transportation. For seniors turning 65 and moving from provincial to federal benefits, that support can be critical.

When someone stops showing up, the club goes looking. If a member is missing from the morning circle, Sanborn and the team track them down. If they've ended up in the hospital, they aren't forgotten.

Sanborn manages a group of volunteers who make hospital visits, helping members stay connected to the club and their friends and keeping their spirits up until they return.

None of this solves the housing crisis. But it means that seniors who are struggling are seen, known and connected. When something goes wrong, someone notices and there's a community ready to help.

To learn more about Our Place's 55+ Club or to support its work, visit ourplacesociety.com.



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Compassion and community are central to Victoria's identity and at Our Place Society that spirit comes to life every day through warm meals, safe shelter, health care, outreach, supportive housing and long-term addiction recovery. Each connection helps build the foundation for greater stability, healing and lasting change. Through trusted relationships and ongoing support, people are given the opportunity to move from surviving to thriving, one step at a time.