

Seniors get advice on keeping healthy, emotionally connected

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Christine Wilson, founder and chair of Sweatergang Companions, begins her speech to the Probus Club of Perth at the Royal Canadian Legion hall on Wednesday, Feb. 7. - Desmond Devoy/Metroland

Get help.

There's plenty of it to go around, if you're a senior.

Several organizations aimed at, or that help seniors, were able to make their slightly-longer elevator pitch at the Probus Club of Perth's monthly meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 7, at the Royal Canadian Legion hall.

Sweatergang Companions

Many gangs have intimidating names: Junior Mafia, the Bloods and Crips, the Hollis Crew. The Sweatergang Companions, however, do not instil fear in the hearts of people.

They just sound warm and cuddly.

"I have always enjoyed spending time with my neighbours," said Christine Wilson, the founder of Sweatergang Companions, which provides "lifestyle assistance to seniors."

Her compassion for seniors began early.

Working at a deli counter as a 15-year-old schoolgirl, she got to know one of her customers, a Second World War veteran. Sometimes, after her shift, "I would write out his stories, and ask him questions."

He showed her souvenirs from his time in combat, including a German map he fished from the water.

"We were both important to each other," she said. "He became like a member of my family."

He died last year, and though he had 12 children of his own, he once had Christmas dinner with Wilson and her family.

She calls herself "an old soul," in part because she likes music from the 1940s.

During her time in university, Wilson became a health care aid (the equivalent to a personal support worker) at a long-term care facility, an experience she found to be "extremely valuable to me," she said.

"I find their stories and being around seniors enriches my life," said Wilson.

In 2012, she was laid off from an Ottawa engineering firm, giving her a chance, at the age of 28, to change course.

"It was a new direction in my life," said Wilson. She looked around and noticed that while PSWs "provide adequate care," because of the sometimes rushed nature of their jobs, "they just don't have the resources," or time "to provide companionship to people."

So, she started the "Sweatergang Companions," which provide companionship for senior citizens.

"I wanted a name that did not sound medical," said Wilson. "It's like a cosy name. Sweaters make you feel good."

Companionship can take the form of something as simple as having a tea and a talk, going grocery shopping, spending the night (in a separate bedroom) with an elderly person in the night or nights after their spouse has died, or doing simple tasks like watering plants, doing dishes, or making a bed.

Wilson explained that personal care serves the needs that you can see (medical, for example), while “companionship serves the need that we cannot see.”

In 2015, she began to hire personal support workers, and “now we do everything. For me, it’s about spending time with people.”

The company operates in the Ottawa Valley, Kingston, and Oxford County, located between London and Kitchener-Waterloo. The latter is still growing, while the Kingston sector has been around since the fall of 2017.

For companions, when it comes to qualifications, while there is a vulnerable sector police background check and companions need to be bonded, “they have to show me that they care about seniors.” Companions can also choose when they want to work. There are “no qualifications to be a companion. Just be a caring person.”

The company already has two male companions, one in Westport and one in Brockville, though most of her staff is female. (Interestingly, one of her employees is her own mother.)

“There is always room for paid and volunteer services,” explained Wilson. “I think we can all work together.”

The “main goal” of her company is not only companionship, but to help seniors stay in their home for longer. “Don’t let them be isolated.”

She encouraged those who have loved ones with dementia to contact her “in the middle stages of dementia,” since having the companions cycle through the house will make the patient more familiar with them. An unfamiliar face is more likely to provoke a bad response in a dementia patient in the latter stages.

The service costs about \$25 per hour but there is an overnight rate, since “you’re not paying us while we sleep,” in a guest bedroom.

In the cool of the pool

“Perth has a lot of older folks,” said community services director Shannon Baillon during her section of the morning, facts backed up by census numbers, which show that “the number of old folks is increasing.”

The town’s pool on Sunset Boulevard is a place used, and loved, by young and old alike, and Baillon contends that many older folks moved to Perth “because of the pool.”

But it is also “the only facility where we run programs,” said Baillon, during her presentation. “We’ve evolved away from that.”

Looking at the pool patrons, Baillon said that “they continue to be active and want to be active,” though necessity may dictate that “they may shift to less strenuous activities.”

“We need to work out your heart to increase circulation,” said Lori Cameron, acting Perth pool manager. Interestingly, just being in the water helps your circulation since “your blood flows better,” in the water, said Cameron. In terms of exercise, “water has 10 times more resistance than air. Water does build muscle.” Cameron noted that there are “social benefits,” to pool time too, since “people will welcome you in no matter what.”

When it comes to the pool, “we are passionate about it,” said Baillon. And pool patrons are passionate about it too. “In every aspect, we are increasing in the numbers (over the past five years),” said Baillon. “It’s a huge part of our community, and we feel we need to keep it.”

The pool offers 50-plus general fitness sessions, at \$2 per session, where the intensity is moderated to your level. While those sessions are on dry land, there are, as one would expect, aquafit classes in the water, as well as other programs.

Keeping an eye on the balanced Ball

For Catherine Ball, owner of Perth Physiotherapy Wellness Centre and Fitness Studio, her goal, when it comes to senior clients, is to support seniors who want “wellness and independent living within their own homes and communities.”

The private clinic has registered physiotherapists, massage therapists, an acupuncturist, and a dietician, as well as group exercise trainers and personal trainers.

The clinic also hosts an OHIP Community Clinic, and their funding agreement with the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care has been renewed until 2020. They are able to provide “episodes of care” to people who qualify, including Ontarians aged 65-plus with a referral from their doctor or nurse practitioner.

There are other classes offered, such as a seniors exercise class at the Perth Civitan Club and Royal Canadian Legion twice a week for active seniors, as well as a falls prevention class at the North Lanark Community Health Centre for 12 weeks, three-to-four times per year, and a stroke class at the Lions Club once a week.

The clinic also has more general fitness classes from spinning, yoga, to Pilates and more.

Ball has had one 99-year-old client who was able to do a 72-second plank — which would be quite the feat for someone half that age.

Her client had “a strong, agile body. He should be your motivation,” said Ball during her presentation.

“I 100 per cent believe in the philosophy that if you don’t use it, you lose it. You have to practice,” said Ball. “You have to take care of your body. You have to take care of your mind if you want to stay in your own home.”