

# Senior Living

SPRING 2015



Alexandria  
Gazette Market

# Senior Living Fit for the Years

Fitness programs for seniors are part of a trend.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL  
GAZETTE PACKET

One night each week, Sue Thompson can be found dribbling a basketball down the court, leading her team, the Nova United, to victory. Thompson, who is in her 60s, is one of the youngest players in her league, the National Senior Women's Basketball Association.

"There are women who play with me who are 80 and living out their dream to play basketball. We were way before Title IX," said Thompson, who is also a professor of physical education at Northern Virginia Community College in Annandale and Alexandria, Va. "The women are fit, but with seniors, the social part is really important. Some of the ladies have been widowed or have spouses with health issues. They've really

been a support group for each other."

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, Thompson is part of a national fitness trend: fitness programs for older adults, including strength training and team sports. Fitness programs for the now-retired and retiring baby boom generation are increasing in popularity.

New research continues to show the benefits of exercise, aerobic and strength training, range from delayed cognitive decline and a boost in social functioning to an ability to manage chronic diseases and even turn back time.

"There are a lot of benefits for the aging population," said Lisa M.K. Chin, an assistant research professor at George Mason University's Department of Rehabilitation Science in Fairfax, Virginia. Exercise "slows physiological changes that come with aging. ... The other thing that exercise manages is chronic diseases that come with aging, such as cardiovascular problems or diabetes."

Mark Brasler, a 69-year-old who

SEE FIT, PAGE 6




*"The Hermitage is where I've finally found my family."*  
— Helena Scott

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The residents at the Hermitage stay busy. Just ask Helena Scott, who was confined to wheelchair for 30 years because of Multiple Sclerosis and with regular physical therapy at the Hermitage, can now walk a mile a day when the weather permits. In her spare time, Helena knits scarves for fellow residents, volunteers in the beauty salon, sits on the Health Center Committee and delivers mail. Our residents also rave about our superb dining service, our courteous and helpful staff, and an overall feeling of caring and security that comes with living at the Hermitage.

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# Senior Living

## Helping Hands

Senior Services of Alexandria.

BY JEANNE THEISMANN  
GAZETTE PACKET

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

Five years ago, Mary Lee Anderson was asked if she could help Senior Services of Alexandria set up an information database. Since that time, what was supposed to be a part-time commitment has turned into a second career for the international telecommunications corporate executive.

"At this point in my life, I didn't expect to be working more than a full time job," said Anderson, who now leads the organization she first volunteered with nearly 30 years ago. "But I wanted to make a difference and saw a way that I could help people."

Anderson took over as Executive Director of Senior Services of Alexandria two years ago after serving as the director of the Resource Center since 2010. During that time, she developed the popular Senior Speaker Series and Friendly Visitor Program.

"Both of those programs have been very successful," Anderson said. "Our speaker series, now in its fourth year, is not just for seniors. Each program is free and open to anyone who is interested in attending."

SSA provides information and services to anyone involved or interested in issues related to seniors. This includes the Senior Information Corner, which can be found in all four of the city's recreation centers, and a monthly television show called Senior Living in Alexandria. The show can be viewed on Comcast Channel 70 or the Senior Services of Alexandria YouTube channel.

"I learned the hard way how to take care of older people in my life," Anderson said. "I was the executor of my mother's estate and realized how much help I needed to navigate the process."

Senior Services of Alexandria, known for the coordination of the city's Meals on Wheels program, has expanded the services available to seniors in need.

"Because of the dedication of our volunteers, we have been able to add a Friendly Visitor program and now the Animeals service," Anderson said. "In partnership with the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria, we can provide pet food to seniors that have pets."

New this year is the Groceries to Go delivery service, a service available through the Giant Grocery store on Duke Street.

"Steve Mason, the general manager of the Duke Street Giant, really stepped up to make this happen," Anderson said. "He was able to work with us to eliminate the usual grocery delivery costs and allow us to offer the service to Alexandria seniors."

In addition to programs like Groceries to Go, Meals On Wheels and Friendly Visitor, Senior Services of Alexandria coordinates events like the Robust Walk-A-Thon and the Dance for All Ages.

"The dance is really great fun," Anderson said. "Students in the T.C. Williams High School Government Association plan the entire event. They set up, decorate, get door prizes and dance the night away with more



Students from T.C. Williams High School National Honor Society deliver Meals on Wheels for Senior Services of Alexandria. Volunteers from Lyles-Crouch Traditional Academy and Burgundy Farm Country Day School also participate each month with the Meals on Wheels program.



Participants celebrate after last year's Senior Services of Alexandria Robust Walk-a-Thon. This year's event will take place Wednesday, April 29 at 10 a.m. at Ben Brenman Park. For more information or to register, visit [seniorservicesalex.org](http://seniorservicesalex.org)

than 100 seniors. They truly do it all and make it a memorable evening for everyone."

But the Meals On Wheels program is still the core of Senior Services of Alexandria, with volunteers coming from across the city. Schools like T.C. Williams, Lyles-Crouch and Burgundy Farm participate, as do the Black Fire Service Professionals of Alexandria and the Sheriff's Department.

"Sheriff Dana Lawhorne and Undersheriff Tim Gleeson are always there for us," Anderson said. "If the weather is bad, they are there with their SUVs to make sure our meals get delivered. And despite the storms this year, I am proud to say because of them and our volunteers, we never missed a delivery because of snow."

"I learned the hard way how to take care of older people in my life."

—Mary Lee Anderson, Senior Services of Alexandria Executive Director

At a time when most people would be winding down their professional careers, Anderson's love for helping people keeps her going.

"I truly love this job," Anderson said. "Everyone likes to do something with kids but it's harder to get volunteers with seniors. But I like knowing that every day at least one thing I do makes a difference to someone."

For more information on any Senior Services of Alexandria programs or events, call 703-836-4414 or visit [www.seniorservicesalex.org](http://www.seniorservicesalex.org).



Tom Irvin and Tom Collelo deliver dog food as part of Animeals, a new partnership between Senior Services of Alexandria and the Animal Welfare League. The program provides the delivery of pet food to seniors in need.



Ellie Fossier, right, delivers groceries as part of the new Senior Services of Alexandria Groceries to Go program. Fossier is the SSA Meals on Wheels program coordinator and an Elrod Fellow.



Former Chief of Police David Baker, left, and Undersheriff Tim Gleeson were featured speakers at the March Senior Services of Alexandria Speaker Series.

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Senior Living

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# Your Life Is Today and Tomorrow

BY ANDREA WORKER  
GAZETTE PACKET

“I didn’t want to come here,” said Bill Woessner, referring to Brightview Assisted Living Community in Great Falls. “That’s right,” agreed Sheila, his wife of more than 50 years, with plenty of her native Scottish brogue to be heard in her voice. “He really didn’t. We have a lovely house here in Great Falls and I don’t think he was ready to budge. But how long after we got here did that change?” she turned to her husband and asked.

“At least a day,” he laughingly replied. “Seriously,” said Bill Woessner, “it probably wasn’t more than the first 48 hours.”

What changed his mind, especially after what many would call a major life-up-heaval?

“The food!” was his answer. “We have gourmet food at every meal, served by the nicest people in the most beautiful surroundings, and we never have to cook it or clean up afterwards.” Also the friendly and interesting residents, and the freedom. The Woessners bound to home maintenance concerns, housekeeping, cooking or “shoveling snow, like we would have been doing last month if we weren’t right here,” gloated Bill. “We have the time to do what we like, to try new things and meet new people, without that worry.”

Bill and Sheila Woessner chatted about their experiences as residents in a senior living community with friends and fellow residents Porta Nickles and Sophia Coulopoulos, over lunch in the Brightview dining room.

Porta Nickles, who is 99, admitted to a bit of a sweet tooth. “My father owned a candy and ice cream shop in upstate New York,” she said, recommending the homemade coffee ice cream for dessert.

Porta Nickles came to Brightview after liv-

ing the last 70 years in Middletown, N.Y., where she helped run the family’s Coney Island hot dog franchise, and later went on to enjoy a career in education with the local school district. Having lived somewhere that long, it’s understandable that the move took some adjusting to, but Nickles found herself comfortable and more than content in short order. “I was lonely there,” she said. “And I didn’t even know how lonely until I got here, starting making new friends, finding out there were so many things I could still do and learn and enjoy. And now I get to see my kids, grandkids and great-grand kids.”

Having family nearby, the visits, and having opportunities designed to promote interaction with different age groups, all help make Brightview a home environment in the estimation of this group of residents.

Sophia Coulopoulos, who had lived for several years in the Maryland suburbs around the District, actually came here from another area community, where she lived with her ill husband until his death. Speaking of him caused a quick smile, but also brought a hint of tears. Porta on her one side and Brightview Community Sales Director Joanna Banks seated on her other side, were immediately offering hugs, pats and encouragement.

Sheila Woessner has always been a game player “and she knows the words to every song going,” Porta Nickles said in admiration.

During her days with the British Information Services in New York City with Bill, Sheila Woessner took home some hefty prize money by playing on the televised “Name that Tune” game show, money that she used to finance their wedding. The couple even appeared on Johnny Carson’s “Who Do You Trust?” game show. Nowadays, Sheila uses her ability to help out at the community’s sing-a-longs.

Many activities are organized and facili-



PHOTOS BY ANDREA WORKER/GAZETTE PACKET

**In the lounge at The Woodlands Retirement Community in Fairfax, Col. James McAllan (US Army-Ret) with Riley on his lap and Linda McAllan offered up some thoughts on their senior community living experience. The McAllans were celebrating their Woodlands one-year anniversary that day.**

tated by Brightview’s Vibrant Living Director, Josh Graf. Bingo is Sophia’s favorite.

Transitioning to senior community living is not always as easy as the lunch bunch at Brightview experienced. Sometimes the move starts with heartache or circumstances that speed up what should be a more lengthy and considered process. That was certainly the case for both Jim Draper and Rachel Garbee, residents at The Hermitage in Alexandria.

Draper was a pastor for many years in the southern portions of the Commonwealth. He and his wife of 53 years were actually engaged in ministerial duties when she fell and hit her head. “It was a simple fall outside a Wendy’s, could happen to anyone.” Two weeks later, Draper was a widower. He continued on, but experienced several medical episodes associated with his own health issues. Eventually, the decision was made for him to move to Northern Virginia, close to family. “It’s been

hard,” he admits. “I miss my wife so much.” To make the transition more difficult, because of his medical condition, Draper can no longer drive. “That’s a real blow,” he said. Rachel Garbee was living in North Carolina and “doing pretty good.” Then one night her furnace exploded. Living alone, she had no one with her to handle the situation. “It was very scary. I didn’t really know what had happened, couldn’t figure out how to turn off the alarms. I went to my neighbors for help and that’s when we found out about the furnace.” Luckily, Rachel Garbee and her home survived the experience, but when her son received the call in the middle of the night, “I was packed up pretty quickly and here I am.”

Both Jim Draper and Rachel Garbee have taken some time to adjust, but things are getting better with the help of staff like Lynette Mitchell, The Hermitage director of marketing and outreach. “She’s a special lady,” said Draper, “really made for the job.” Other residents have also helped Jim, Rachel, and others settle in to this new phase of their lives.

Gladys Laclede knows what it’s like to be a “newbie” from out of state. Moving here to be closer to her sons, she offers support and assistance where she can.

Peg Bixler remembers when Jim Draper first arrived. “I remember when we met in the elevator,” she told him. “I could tell it was hard.” She recalls telling him to just

“Wait a bit. It does get easier.”

Of course, by the description of her daily activities, it sounds like Peg Bixler doesn’t have much time for waiting. A former nurse, she volunteers at the Kennedy Center, with the Wounded Warrior and Honor Flight projects, and more. She also fits in some serious walking to keep fit and limber, as well as activities offered at The Hermitage and visits with her daughter who lives in the area. Peg is grateful that she is still in good health and still able to be “a fairly quick walker.”

She tilts her head at friend Bea Larson, who is laughing that Peg “nearly finished me off” when she took Bea for their first few walks together.

Rachel Garbee also walks, but mostly sticks to Hermitage hallway strolls, often in the evenings after dinner. “It’s quiet then, and where else could I take a walk in my pajamas, bathrobe and slippers?”

The Hermitage offers its residents a number of activities and amenities, although Peg, Bea and Gladys think that more people should take advantage of what’s on offer. Gladys Laclede was on the community’s activities committee and they were always on the lookout for something new and fun to get the residents involved.

Peg Bixler offered advice to those who might have such a move coming in the future. “Get rid of a lot of stuff as soon as you can. Don’t wait. And do what you can to

make it easier on your kids.” Bixler thought she had done a good job of downsizing before the move, but still found herself “with a lot of stuff I just don’t need.”

Rachel Garbee encourages other “newbies” to not be afraid to ask questions or ask for help, especially if your move to senior community living is an abrupt one like hers.

“All of my questions and concerns have been met with nothing but genuine care and helpfulness here.”

“Be open,” is what Gladys Laclede advises. Pastor Jim Draper, who has started using more of his time to help others in need around the community, thinks just speaking to everybody and actively looking for friendship is key to making the most of this next life chapter.

Bea Larson certainly hasn’t lost her sense of humor with her new living arrangements. “My advice,” she said, “is don’t be hard of hearing!”

Col. James McAllan (U.S. Army Ret.) and his wife, Linda, who retired from an administrative career with the IRS, started their research on retirement living options six years ago. As you would expect from a military intelligence officer (Army, Civil Defense/FEMA) and a woman who made order and efficiency part of her life’s work, these two had a plan and a checklist of requirements. While living in Falls Church, they visited dozens of communities over the years.

“We didn’t want one of the really big places,” said Col. McAllan. “We were looking for someplace with a diverse population and where we could comfortably remain, even if our health circumstances changed.” The couple also decided they would prefer a community that was locally owned, and better still, locally managed. Their extensive research and personal inspections eventually took them to The Woodlands Retirement Community in Fairfax. “It checked all the boxes.”

The McAllans hadn’t planned to move in when they did. “My knees really made that decision for us,” said James. Their daughter, who lives just minutes away, told them it was “all meant to be.” And the icing on the cake was that The Woodlands would accept the other member of the immediate family, 4-year-old shih tzu Riley, who has been dubbed “The Mayor” by many of the other residents. Riley adores visiting – and being properly fussed over by –

residents, staff, and visitors.

“Coming down to the lobby is his favorite activity,” said Linda.

The Woodlands offers physical and entertainment activities, including an indoor heated pool and a well-equipped exercise room, but Linda noted the variety of groups, clubs, lectures and discussions available.

“We’ve had the first Ambassador to Israel as a speaker, a violinist who spent 40 years with the Washington Opera orchestra, a retired opera singer, and so many more, in addition to book clubs, poetry clubs, gardening,” Linda McAllan said.

Betty Marshall, whose apartment is frequently used as a stop on any tour of The Woodlands, couldn’t agree more with her neighbors, the McAllans. A Fairfax resident for more than 25 years, Marshall, who was born on Cyprus when her South Carolinian mom followed her father to his native Greece for a time, has also seen a bit of the world thanks to her husband’s military postings in Alaska, Okinawa, Greece and Paris. Like the McAllans, Betty did quite a bit of planning for this move. When her husband, Col. Charles Marshall (Ret) died in 2013, she put those plans into action. Betty Marshall, a music major who taught the instrument wherever the couple went, couldn’t leave the piano behind. Nor could she leave her favorite furnishings and artwork, many from her Okinawa days.

When not busy with activities outside of The Woodlands world like volunteering at the Fair Oaks Hospital gift shop or heading up the Flower Guild at the Providence Pres-

byterian Church, Betty is involved with the goings on in her own community. “And the people here make it easy on every level.”

“I would just tell people to never look back,” Marshall said. “Keep the memories, they are what made you. But your life is today and tomorrow. Keep looking ahead. Plan. And find a place where you can really thrive.”

If it’s time to start contemplating the transition to senior independent or assisted living for yourself or a loved one sorting through the information and the available properties and options can seem overwhelming.

There are properties that resemble four-star resorts. There are communities that are extensions of a particular faith institution or religion. Others, like non-profit Vinson Hall in McLean were founded to serve our large commissioned military officers population and government workers of equal rank. There are properties set in rural locations, while others like The Jefferson, a Sunrise Senior Living community located steps away from the Ballston Metro and Ballston Common Mall in Arlington, are set right in the thick of things. Westminster at Lake Ridge and IngleSide at King Farm in Maryland offer small town living right in the Washington area. There are communities offering every possible range of care, service and amenities in all price ranges.



**Gladys Laclede, Bea Larson, Jim Draper, Rachel Garbee and Peg Bixler share a table and a photo op in the library of The Hermitage, a senior assisted living community in Alexandria. Peg is the veteran in the group and does her best to welcome newcomers.**



**Betty Marshall is so noted for her gracious hostess skills that she is often called upon as an “ambassador” for The Woodlands Retirement Community. One look around her two-bedroom apartment and you know why it is frequently chosen as a stop on the**

# Inclusive Camaraderie for Seniors in Alexandria

Class offers a place to chat and get balanced.

**M**argaret Lewis got things going for seniors at the Mount Vernon Recreation Center, starting the first Tai Chi class, knitting group and square dancing classes about 15 or 20 years ago.

"It all started with Margaret Lewis," says Donna MacDonald.

MacDonald, who was one of the original group practicing Tai Chi before it became popular has been doing this every week for 13 years. She says Margaret Lewis, who will be 81 this summer, isn't at the center anymore, but her legacy, this group of faithful practitioners of Tai Chi (and knitters, and dancers) remains.

MacDonald retired after 33 years at Verizon and now works part-time, but she always makes time for Tai Chi, where she enjoys the inclusive camaraderie.

Robert Tsukayama, who worked for 40 years for the State Department and lived all over the world, has been coming for 6 or 7 years. Indicative of the relaxed atmosphere and social aspect of the class, the conversation turns to Vietnam, where he served just before the U.S. pulled out, and he recounts a story about the famous "LBJ" (Long Binh Jail) where U.S. Army soldiers spent many a day for misdemeanors committed while serving in South Vietnam. Carol Norman, who was with the National Education Association before retirement, said she now makes Tai Chi part of her daily routine: instead of getting out of bed and going straight



Carol Norman and Robert Tsukayama doing Tai Chi at the Mount Vernon Rec Center



Donna MacDonald has been doing Tai Chi at the Mount Vernon Center for 11 years.



Carol Norman at Tai Chi.

PHOTOS BY  
EDEN BROWN/  
GAZETTE PACKET



Robert Tsukayama practicing Tai Chi

## Get Involved:

**Mount Vernon Recreation Center** at 2701 Commonwealth Ave., Alexandria

Other activities for seniors at the center include Knitting Club, and a social night on Fridays at 6:30, where those over 55 can come to hear speakers, play games, and meet others. For seniors who aren't able to walk, there are classes of Chair Tai Chi in other centers. See [Alexandriava.gov/Aging](http://Alexandriava.gov/Aging) for a full list of programs for seniors in the area.

for coffee and email, she puts it all off until she establishes her focus and gets integrated with Tai Chi. She talks about Tai Chi as though it's an old friend: "It's not the Tango, it's not cheerleading, it's the whole body: think ... Swan. When you are there, you can't think of anything but the moves."

But they all agree one of the best parts of the class is getting together and talking about anything and everything, and they laugh easily and often. They usually sit and "let the words come" to clear the room for meditative movement. All of them are retired now, all of them once lived by lists and sat at desks. Now, at least once a week on Thursday afternoons at 2:30, they reach gracefully into the air for "Chi." The class is free, and they are always happy to see new faces.

# Fit for the Golden Years

FROM PAGE 2

lives in Springfield, Va., has been active for most of the past 20 years. He moved into a retirement community four months ago and got a fitness assessment in the property's gym. The results led him to up his fitness game.

"I still walk every morning and do weights and resistance machines every other day," said Brasler. "I was also told that I needed to take balance class. We focus on agility, how to stand up straight and how to get up when you fall. We also do stretching, yoga and

Pilates. I feel more confident about myself."

Such fitness classes can help preserve mobility and cognitive function, say researchers. "It helps in terms of preserving bone mass and maintaining mobility longer," said Chin. "If you're using your muscles, especially during weight-bearing exercises, ultimately it reduces the risk of falling and improves balance."

An exercise class that includes both aerobic, strength and balance exercises can help preserve freedom and independence for seniors. "The key components of staying physically active are having strong muscles,

reasonable flexibility and endurance, such as the ability to keep walking or doing an activity and not getting tired and fatigued right away," said Rita Wong, professor of physical therapy and associate dean of graduate and professional studies at Marymount University in Arlington. "It's essential to keep oneself mobile and active."

It's almost never too late to increase fitness levels, Wong said. "Often with older adults, people think that they can't improve anymore so why bother. But research has shown time and time again that older adults have an ability to improve that is as similar

as young adults'."

"People need community [and are] finding it in a holistic approach to exercise at their own comfort level," said Nina Elliot, founder of the TRUE Fit program and co-owner of TRUE Health and Wholeness. "People work out to the best of their ability and everybody gets a workout that's right for their body. They're given modifications and the focus is to do your best, have fun and enjoy exercise."

Elliot believes exercising in groups has an accountability factor. "The number one thing that can keep you from aging is exercise," she said. "Aging can be very isolating for some people. The more people can get out and be around people, the better."

# Senior Living

## Aging in Place

Finding out about the latest services and programs.

BY MARYANNE BEATTY  
SENIOR SERVICES OF ALEXANDRIA



Alexandria is a great place to be a senior – there are so many different services and organizations with programs designed to help older residents remain in their homes and age in place safely and in a healthy environment.

Research shows that the vast majority of people 50 and older want to stay in their homes and communities as long as possible. There are many things to consider about “aging in place.”

Each month, Senior Services of Alexandria presents a speaker series event focused on topics important to older members of our community and their loved ones. Senior Services invites other nonprofits, city agencies and relevant businesses to present information about their services and programs so that the audience can learn about the many resources available to them in Alexandria.

Last month, AARP gave an excellent “Homefit” workshop presentation. We also heard from Shane Cochrane of Alexandria’s Office of Housing, Katherine Dixon, Executive Director of Rebuilding Together Alexandria, and Undersheriff Tim Gleason. More than 100 people were in the audience at Westminster Presbyterian Church and everyone learned valuable information about how to make their homes safer and more accessible, public and nonprofit

funding for home modifications, and how to avoid scam artists that target vulnerable seniors. You can find out more by watching Senior Living in Alexandria on Alexandria Comcast Channel 70 every Sunday at 2 p.m. and see the full Speaker Series event immediately afterwards at 2:30 p.m.

Another component of “Aging in Place” is knowing what services and innovative programs are available in the community that will assist you personally as you get older. That is

the focus of the next Senior Speaker Series event, which will be held at Beth El Hebrew Congregation at 3830 Seminary Road on Wednesday, April 15. At Home in Alexandria (AHA)! is co-sponsoring the morning and will share information about their successful “village,” which provides support services and social opportunities for its members. The City’s Division of Aging and Adult Services and Senior Services of Alexandria will also be on-hand to discuss services such as Meals on Wheels, Friendly Visitor, Animeals, Groceries to Go, and Caregiver Support. The Golden Girls Network home-sharing service will also be featured and Goodwin House at Home will be talking about their new continuing care program for seniors who wish to remain in their homes. It will be a very informative session and experts will be on hand to answer any questions attendees might have.

All Senior Speaker Series programs are free and open to the public with light refreshments. Registration begins at 9:30 a.m. and the program will run from 10 a.m. until noon. To register for the “Aging in Place” April 15th program, go to seniorservicesalex.org or call 703-836-4414, ext. 110.

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# Arlene Hewitt Sets the Pace for Seniors in Alexandria

A recipe for activism at any age.

BY EDEN BROWN  
GAZETTE PACKET

She is four feet 10 inches tall and 84 years old. She tutors children who cannot read; she champions health insurance for the uninsured in Alexandria; she meets with mayors and senators; she takes 90-year-old gentlemen out to dinner; she wants to reduce the teen pregnancy rate in Alexandria; and she never lets more than a few days go by without chatting with her children or grandsons, usually via email or skype.

Arlene Hewitt is a power to be reckoned with in her ninth decade. She doesn't take "no" for an answer. She pursues challenges, and this includes aging. Mah Jongg and Bridge? Not for this senior.

Despite having officially retired in 2002 at 72, Hewitt continues to stay involved in the community she came to as a social worker in 1967. She is proof that more and more seniors are looking at the last third of their lives as an opportunity, not a vacation.

Hewitt is the daughter of immigrants. Her father was against sending her to college, but her homemaker mother — a strong-willed lady in her own right — insisted. After she graduated, she looked around her: what could a young woman do with herself in those days? Become a secretary, a school teacher, or a nurse? None of those appealed to Arlene, so she took up a friend's suggestion of social work.

"So you see? I just sort of fell into it," she said. "I didn't wake up one morning and feel I needed to help the unfortunate, I just got a tip from someone that I might be good at it." She landed in Alexandria after her husband's business in Massachusetts failed. Anxious to have his wife work, he phoned Alexandria Hospital to see if they had a position: no, they said, and they'd never heard of a social worker in a hospital. Hewitt took her case to the top, something

**"Every parent should live near a daughter."**  
— Arlene Hewitt



PHOTOS BY EDEN BROWN/GAZETTE PACKET

**Arlene Hewitt's favorite quote: "To the world you may be one person but to one person you may be the world."**

she learned to do early on, and swears by, and ended up talking herself into the first social worker position at the hospital. A few years later, she had a department. She was the first to create a booklet called "Know Your Community," full of resources for seniors in Alexandria.

Fast forward, Hewitt retired, but was not one to go quietly into the night. Hewitt said because she was already involved in the city, she felt the need to continue. As she put it, why should she let her background and experience go to waste? People knew her. She knew people. It was easy to make the transition. Hewitt notes not every senior can do this so seamlessly, but every senior can get involved. Her recipe?

Alexandria has more than 200 boards always looking for members. For her, the first board was the Alexandria Public Health Commission. It was just starting out so she joined. It took a while to get results. That has been one of the best aspects of her long-term service, seeing the commission flourish.

"Take a look at that list of boards", she said. "Meetings are only once a month for boards, and you can build relationships and make new friends. Being on a board challenges you. You learn the subject matter gradually. They are always happy to have someone."

But this wasn't enough: She and her late husband tutored kids in the area, many of them of foreign parents, to read. She got others to come with her. "One 90-year-old whose husband had just died

was miserable," she said. "She moped around, she had no one to eat dinner with, she was depressed." Hewitt took her to the Alexandria Tutoring Consortium, a local group which fits seniors' schedules. "The best part about tutoring is the relationships you build with children. You become attached. You meet them in the library, you meet their parents, you watch them thrive, and at the end of the year, you'd be surprised how strongly you feel about each other and how grateful the parents are."

Hewitt volunteers with the annual "First Night" program in Alexandria. She takes the 5-9 p.m. shift, so she isn't out too late. She said she still gets a kick out of showing people the map of events and being there at one of the most exciting events of the year. For her, it is all about helping people decipher the map and head in the right direction.

She is also a driver for Meals on Wheels. While many people her age are getting meals, she partners with a friend and does the driving. "It's great," she said. "They send you the routes, you pick the area where you feel comfortable driving. They are never upset if you can't make it, and it takes so little time, from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. And people are so happy to see you. It is a wonderful feeling that someone out there needs you."

She is also in the Medical Reserve Corps. They are volunteer first responders.

For the past three years, Hewitt has enrolled in courses at Northern Virginia Community College, which is free for seniors, including parking. She loves being with the young students. She took South American history and bio-medical ethics, and she said, "You just audit the courses so you don't have to take the tests if you don't want."

After the death of her husband in 2009, her social circle changed. The couples she and he used to go out to eat with also

## Resources for Seniors

www.wrighttoread.org  
www.alexandriava.gov/Aging  
www.alexandriatutors.org/  
www.medicalreservecorps.org  
www.seniorservicesalex.org/  
www.volunteeralexandria.org

changed. She decided that watching a Nationals game by herself was lonely, so she called up one of the widowers and asked him if he was watching the game. He was, and when she asked if he'd like company, he brightened: "It's so much more fun watching the Nats with someone."

She takes another 90-year-old out to dinner. He has macular degeneration and couldn't read anymore. She took him to the library, got him a library card, took out books in large print, set him up with the magnifier that magnifies the print, and he was reading again. "Of course", she said, "not everyone is an extrovert like me. But calling up someone who is doing nothing isn't hard: just be aware of people in your own age category, think about what they might need, and if all else fails, call them up and ask if they'd like to go to lunch."

Hewitt has a personal trainer who comes in two or three times a year and sets up a program or reviews her exercises to make sure she is doing them correctly. She has a treadmill in her bedroom and a big ball she sits on in front of the TV. Although she doesn't like smart phones, she is a great fan of email and skype. "If I didn't email and skype," she said, "I would lose touch with my grandsons."

"Take advantage of senior centers," she advised. "Tai Chi, chair Yoga, whatever it is they offer. If you don't do it, you'll find soon you can't do things anymore. Don't be afraid: you'll work up to it, even if you start with small weights." She also suggests checking the "Guide to the Lively Arts" in the Style section of the Washington Post, or the calendar in the Gazette. She attend the military band and orchestra performances which are free.

Face what's coming: Hewitt is thinking ahead to a time when she won't be able to drive or walk as well, and she has gotten on the waiting list for Green Springs, where she says with a smile, there are more than 200 organizations functioning right there. She has delegated her taxes and budget to her daughter, Jo, so things are in good shape when she dies, and she insisted on paying for her daughter's service by putting money into the children's college funds. She doesn't want anyone to be inconvenienced when she dies, so she has a plan for the end-game.

She raves about her children, and her grandchildren. "Every parent should live near a daughter," she advised.

She has also thought ahead to what might happen if she were to fall, or go into a coma. "I've told my grandson," she said, "if anything ever happens to me and I'm in a coma, I want you to put earphones on me and turn up the Nutcracker Suite as loud as it will go." Meanwhile, Hewitt looks at the clock: time to go to the next event.



**Arlene Hewitt's wall of awards and recognition in her bedroom.**