

JN DETROIT JEWISH NEWS

It Takes a Village

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Aging in place movement

Makes strides in suburban Detroit

Placed on the wall in Shari Smith's Office is a poster about how to build community. That's what she does every day as a director of the Village in the Woods, the first Oakland County organized "village" that is part of a growing national movement to help adults age in place.

"When I go out and talk to my members, I love, love, love what I am doing," says Smith, who began last year to build the Village. "I love hearing their stories and learning about their families. It is in these moments that I know I have the best job in the world".

This month, the Village in the Woods welcomes Judy Willett, a Huntington Woods native who has spent 30 years in older adult services and started the first Village in Boston in 2002. The national director of the Village to Village Network, an umbrella organization linking Villages nationwide, will speak Thursday, June 26, on the topic, “It Takes Villages: Rock ‘n’ Roll Generation Changes the Face of Aging”

Under her leadership, the Village movement has grown from 95 Villages in 2009 to more than 140 and counting, with 120 more Villages expected to open in the next three years.

“The Village movement in the past five years has increased enormously across the country,” says Willett, 60, who lived locally from age 2 until she married more than 30 years ago. “More than 25,000 people age 60 and above in 40 states are served by Villages — 40 percent in urban settings, 40 percent in suburbs and 20 percent in rural locations.

“Ninety percent of older people want to stay in their homes for the rest of their lives,” Willett says. “Villages are a common-sense way to do that, providing community, exercise, engagement and friendship. Really, the Villages help us live a lifestyle we all want — filled with meaning and people.”



Judy Willett

Smith’s job is to attract Village in the Woods members from residents of Huntington Woods, Berkley or Pleasant Ridge. They pay \$575 per year individually (\$775 for a household) to join the Village and receive services, programs and camaraderie to make it easy to stay at home as they age. She plans programs and fields calls from members (currently about 10). She works to build member, volunteer and vendor bases all the time. Smith also has been invited to members’ homes to hang out, and she says she always learns something.



David Hoptman

At 89-year-old David Hoptman’s Huntington Woods home, Smith got a crash course on jazz music, including a CD he burned for her of Duke Ellington music. A photographer/lecturer who lives alone and has lived in Huntington Woods for 25 years, Hoptman found needed dental help thanks to the Village. He turns to Smith for “suggestions about how to improve my living conditions” to allay symptoms of neuropathy. A century ago, multiple generations of a family resided in the same home or block, with help for relatives built right into the family model. Around the 1970s, the retirement center concept caught on and families split, sending

older generations to nursing homes and assisted living facilities as women went to work and could no longer stay home to assist as needed.

Today, there are choices, thanks to the growing Village movement. That's great, as a recent AARP study shows that 88 percent of those age 65 and older prefer to stay in their residences for as long as possible.

Debra Umberson, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas who studies aging and relationships, said in a Washington Post article earlier this year: "The Boomers want to stay independent — they want to stay active and vibrant and connected ... and that's reflected in their housing choices."



Chef Annabel Cohen with Shari Smith, director of Village in the Woods, at a culinary program planned by the Village Mavens

Aging at Home

The Village in the Woods was launched by Jewish Senior Life to be a community-based, member-led organization serving Huntington Woods, Berkley and Pleasant Ridge. Its purpose is to support members to age at home and in community through concierge services, health, wellness and social programs, volunteer opportunities and neighbor connections.

Annette Lippman, 90 and a 50-year Huntington Woods resident, asked Smith for help setting up a medical alert system in case of emergencies. "I still think I'm 50 until I try to get out of a chair," she says.

Lippman may use Village transportation services for doctor appointments. With fantastic health, Lippman started using the medical alert system as a precaution. “The Village is a good program; it’s an investment,” she says.



“We believe in the Village concept because we want to give people choices and opportunities to live life to their fullest, in a place they choose to call home,” says Rochelle Upfal, JSL CEO. “The Village provides mechanisms to remain in one’s home with neighbors and enhance life with services and a social network.”

JSL started the local Village by hiring Smith, with behind-the-scenes guidance from Upfal and Barbara Giles, JSL associate director. The Village in the Woods is intended to be a grassroots organization directed by members, as it is now.

The Village has received more than \$10,000 in donations in addition to dues directly from community members.

The Village in the Woods joins a Michigan Coalition of Villages that includes Community Connections of Michigan (through Presbyterian Villages of Michigan), Heart of Lansing Village, Sharecare of Leelanau, C2S2 Chelsea Community Senior Services and a Battle Creek Village.

“The Village concept is unique in that it can be molded to meet the needs of seniors in any community,” says Peggy Vaughn-Payne, executive director of the NorthWest Initiative in Lansing. The Heart of Lansing Village has been in the works for two and a half years and will begin offering services this summer as one of the first ethnically and socioeconomically diverse villages in the country.

The Village in the Woods is “our answer to taking care of the generation that wants to stay at home,” says JSL’s Giles. “With the demographics of our aging Metro Detroit community, building more bricks and mortar is not the answer. For a couple of dollars a day, you can have the services to help you stay at home. It’s a matter of bringing together resources, with reliable, vetted vendors who can help you stay at home for the rest of your life.

“By joining a Village, you’re empowering yourself and taking control,” Giles adds.

“The key to the Village is this idea of choice, to live where we want to live,” Upfal says.

Village Mavens

The Village in the Woods is supported by a group of “Mavens” or “experts,” which includes Nancy Siegel Heinrich, Cindy Schwartz, Robin Trepeck, Donna Pearlman, Joan Brode, Susan Ruttenberg, Susan Witus, Arlene Selik and Ina Cohen. Programs they plan for the Village include movies, music, consumer protection programs, culinary gatherings and community events.

Heinrich, an immediate JSL past president, says, “I believe in the Village and want to be part of the excitement of creating it and ensuring its success.”

She sees the beauty in joining before she needs the support — it helps to build the community with a multitude of generations supporting one another.

Smith gives a monthly report to the Huntington Woods Senior Advisory Committee. Part of her job is to work with local municipalities served by the Village to create partnerships.

Going forward, Smith says the Village will maintain a high-level focus on educational programs, bringing academic, political, artistic and entrepreneurial content to members. The Village also will reach out to more surrounding communities, including north Oak Park. ■

Lynne Meredith Golodner | Special to the Jewish News

Judy Willett, national director of the Village to Village Network, will speak on “It Takes Villages: Rock ‘n’ Roll Generation Changes the Face of Aging,” at 7 p.m. Thursday, June 26, at Local Kitchen and Bar in Ferndale. For more information about the Village in the Woods, call (248) 592-5041 or go to [Village in The Woods](#). Writer Lynne Golodner is owner of YourPeople LLC, a Southfield public relations firm.