

Aging in a healing and thriving community

BY NADIA STEFYN

Often overlooked and under supported, seniors in our society frequently fall through the cracks. Many older adults find themselves isolated for increasingly longer periods, as the loss of loved ones, mobility issues, fewer friends, reduced finances, or language skills begin to erode independence. Having lost those closest to them, seniors often yearn for both physical and emotional intimacy. On top of this, physical limitations can increase dependency on children — not just for getting around, but also for social connection.

A program run by Family Services of Greater Vancouver aims to help change that by supporting seniors in a meaningful way to fulfill social and emotional needs. Vital Connections is a free counselling program offering low-barrier emotional support for seniors dealing with loss, grief, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation among other challenges. The program helps seniors find new ways to continue living a purposeful and fulfilling life — for example, by understanding how to move on after the death of a loved one while still honouring their memory; learning how to develop new friendships to drive intellectual stimulation; and finding activities such as theatre or dance as an outlet for physical expression. The Vital Connections counsellor is also a senior and is, thus, better able to relate to client experiences.

A key factor in the success of the Vital Connections program is its location at Century House, one of Canada’s first centres catering to adults aged 50+. It’s a hive of activity year round, offering a vast range of free or low-cost social programs and clubs. Seniors can complement counselling sessions with myriad activities to counter isolation. These activities provide mental, emotional, and physical fulfillment and include games, dance and fitness classes, language skills classes, arts, and music. Fluid referrals are made between programs, enhancing effectiveness and creating a web of support under one roof.

One example of a connection-fostering activity at Century House is the Community Kitchens program. Once or twice per month, participants learn to cook a new meal and enjoy it together afterwards. Program manager Pat Steiner says that while the Community Kitchens program teaches valuable life skills, many participants come first and foremost for the social aspect.

his long days sitting at home. Like many seniors, he had come to rely on his family for social connection. As supportive as his children were, they were not enough to fill his social needs. He attended Community Kitchens and tapped into a strong and supportive social network. From there, he discovered a number of other programs at Century House, including computer skills classes. Having a place to go each week to



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“Community Kitchens is in an intimate setting, ideal for building connections among seniors whose paths may never cross otherwise,” says Steiner. “Even seniors with limited English are able to connect through the universal language of food.”

Steiner described one senior whose wife had passed, and he was struggling to fill

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The interconnected programs at Century House are a great example of communities and organizations working together to facilitate independence and contribute to the quality of life for seniors.

“Many seniors end up becoming surrogates for each other, providing support and friendship,” says Steiner. “As a society, we need to do a lot more to support seniors than we do.”

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