

Forget Me Not: Organization lets seniors help seniors

By Noelle Leavitt

I want to live in a world where seniors don't have to live in nursing homes and are able to spend their last days surrounded by the comforts of their own homes.

After I watched my grandmother die in a long-term care facility in 2006, I realized that seniors in our country have very few choices about where they live when their health starts to decline. Options are slim for elders who break bones, are diagnosed with Alzheimer's or are fighting terminal illnesses. Without a comfortable nest egg or the financial support of a large family, confinement to a nursing home is almost unavoidable.

Even those with solid retirement funds and family money are sent to nursing homes because their families live hundreds of miles away and are unable to provide the love and attention that's needed for those who are sick and growing old.

I commend and highly respect those who reach out to help seniors know they are not forgotten in society and work to find alternatives to the harsh realities of nursing homes.

Seniors Helping Seniors is one organization which plays that role, by giving retired and healthy elders an opportunity to earn income by working for other seniors with declining health.

The organization recently opened shop in Colorado and offers non-medical services to seniors that live at home by hiring elders who still want to work but can't work full-time to help their peers with walking the dog, gardening, cooking, cleaning, and household repairs.

"It's about giving and receiving," said Carlton Hall, who opened the Colorado branch of Seniors Helping Seniors earlier this year. "It's hard for seniors to find work. With the retirement funds going away in a lot of cases, they're left without funds. With the economy, whether its good or bad at any given time, people just need more income sometimes. So they're going out and getting jobs as greeters at Walmart, and at fast-food restaurants."

Such jobs aren't very rewarding, which is why Carlton Hall and his wife, Jean Hall, were thrilled when they found out about Seniors Helping Seniors — a for profit organization based in Pennsylvania — and decided to bring the franchise to Colorado.

The couple, both in their 60s, asked longtime friend David Deneau to become the chief operating officer. Deneau has a special place in his heart for the organization's mission, as he helped his mother stay independent and out of a rest home prior to her death in 2001

"We know that in-home care keeps the person independent, it's not significantly more expensive, and it's certainly a better quality of life for the individual to be in their own surroundings and where they've lived, where their things are, where their family has grown up, where their memories are," Deneau said. "To go into a nursing home, they just don't have the connections with people."

Retired couple John and Jane Killham, 63 and 57, respectively, are currently living on Social Security, so they became independent contractors with Seniors Helping Seniors.

"We're at the ages that we don't make enough money with what we get, and at our age it's kind, of hard to get other jobs," said Jane Killham, who cooks and cleans for elders while her husband does simple household repairs.

They get paid between \$10 and \$20, depending on the service they provide.

"If you're calling a plumber, it's around \$100, so it really benefits seniors financially," Jane Killham said.

It gives the Killhams an opportunity to connect with others and get a paycheck.

"A lot of people that are growing older have a lot of skills and are very talented, and when you get older, people kind of write you off. People see us as a drag on society, but we have the ability to help," John Killham said.

To learn more about Seniors Helping Seniors, contact David Deneau at SHS@ColoradoSHS.com or 720-242-5285

Noelle Leavitt, a former news editor at Evergreen Newspapers, is the founder of the Forget Me Not foundation, in which volunteers deliver donated flowers to nursing home residents. Contact her at leavittliz@yahoo.com or 720-299-4895.

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