

COMMISSION ON THE AGING
4 Brush Hill Road
New Fairfield, CT 06812

COMMUNITY FORUM

"AGING IN PLACE; GAINS AND LOSSES"

MINUTES

Saturday April 27, 2013

The Commission on the Aging hosted a Community Forum entitled "Aging in Place; Gains and Losses" on Saturday, April 27, 2013 at the Senior Center from 10:00am-12:00 noon. Secretary, Laurie Busse, took the minutes.

PRESENT: Maureen Salerno, Chairperson, Cindy LaCour, Vice Chairperson, Jeannette Sweeney, Kathy Hull, Janet Loya and Roberta Ilardo,

SPEAKER: Dr. Charles Herrick, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at Danbury Hospital

PANELISTS: Ellen Burnett, Chuck Finnegan, Catherine Lawrence, Ernie & Gail Lehman, and Jeannette Sweeney.

Introduction & Welcome, Maureen Salerno:

Maureen Salerno talked about the Commission on the Aging's dedication to providing programs for seniors that promote quality of life for aging in place and discussed Dr. Herrick's back ground which includes being named Doctor of the Year by Connecticut Magazine, faculty member at NY Medical College as an assistant clinical professor of psychology, a student at Danbury Hospital, and a member of the faculty at the Vermont School of Medicine, not to mention his full time job as Chairman, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at Danbury Hospital.

Dr. Charles Herrick

Dr. Charles Herrick stated he was going to talk about the gains and losses of aging, based on personal experience. He talked about infancy and childhood where he was dependant upon his parents to take care of him and make sure his daily needs were met. While he was in college he had all the privileges of adulthood and none of the responsibilities, although subconsciously he knew that if he got bad grades then that would be the end of his career. When one grows older many times they have to start depending on others to meet life's basic needs. If life is good, then many people would say life is short. If one has a bitter life, then perhaps they would say life is too long. He remembered when he

was a 3rd year med student and he was assigned to an elderly patient. One day she pointed her finger right at him and said "I remember when I was your age, it seems like yesterday". He thought about this elderly person who was trying to figure him out and how she was reminiscing about her youth. Why does time speed up as we age? Memory influences our sense of time. The "X" axis is our sense of living and the "Y" axis is equal to our events. Dr. Herrick remembered one time when his wife and children were discussing a specific event when all of them were present including him and how all of them had very vivid memories of this event except for him; which he still cannot recall. They described the event in such vivid details that he panicked. In his panic he recalled having conversations with his family and feeling anxious about that he doesn't remember. It was a mundane event that didn't register in his mind as anything that was all that important, but did in theirs. So he felt like he was losing his memory. It seems that as he gets older he loses greater and greater pieces of his memory and he is becoming more selective in what he remembers than previously. Dr. Herrick talked about you remember facts of events in dribs and drabs but you will vividly remember your emotional reaction to an event. Your memory events grow as you age. When you have enjoyable memories time flies faster than it actually did. The less we do the less we register memories; to stay young keep thinking, and keep doing new things. Dr. Herrick discussed the different types of memory. As people age they start to lose part of their procedural memory and they are fine so long as you do not take them out of their daily routine. As people age and their memory goes they tend to adapt by narrowing their environment and talked about some patients who seemed fine until they became ill or required medication and how they would become confused and disoriented not even remembering their own family members. This is because they had started narrowing their environment and taking them out of it is very confusing for them.

Dr. Herrick talked about the loss of hearing, vision, and smell. The loss of smell can lead to loss of memories associated with a particular scent. He discussed his own loss of smell affects his taste to food. After people start to lose their vision and hearing they tend to lose their independence which instills anger. For example he has a patient who is very angry at their daughter after she took their car away after they had an accident. The loss of driving can be very difficult to adapt to especially in rural areas.

Dr. Herrick talked about how some of his patients feel a loss of purpose after retiring and discussed how he is not a fan of self help books. A friend of his, Chris Crowley the author of "Younger Next Year" kept trying to get him to read his book. Finally after much badgering from Chris he read the book. It basically states forget retiring to the easy chair with your remote, work hard the rest of your life, take chances, work at your relationships, and get involved in your community. Become an organizer, take risks and build bridges. Not all of your experiences may be positive and you may not like everyone you meet, so build a pack, and find new friends, do things to help others. Being happy is a decision you make without external sources. If you are not enjoying life, pretend that you are; and keep faking it until your attitude catches up.

Intermission:

Refreshments were served.

Panel Response:

Maureen Salerno introduced the panelist who were hand picked because they are representatives of what aging and quality of life can be about or is about.

Catherine Lawrence talked about her hearing loss and how sometimes she uses it to work for her. She was widowed at the age of 40 and has never remarried and she loves to travel. One day the virtual brick fell on her head so she sold her large home to be in a retirement community. Her new home had to have the following requirements, one floor, walking distance to town, incase she is unable to drive, and have heat & hot water included so she will not have to worry. It is her do or die attitude that keeps her going.

Gail Lehman is semi retired. She talked about her memory is like a filing cabinet, the older you are the more "stuff" it holds and hence the longer it takes to retrieve it. Gail talked about the importance of volunteering and being a part of the community.

Ernie Lehman is a retired math teacher and he volunteers. It is important to understand your limits and stay within them. People may think that just because you are retired then you have all the time in the world and try to push things on you. You don't have to do everything. Find something(s) that you can dedicate time to. When you volunteer organizations depend on you to show up so it is important to know your limits and treat your volunteer position as if it were your job. This way the time you devote will be rewarding to both you and the organization.

Jeannette Sweeney's husband worked for IBM. She shared her experiences of moving 11 times in 15 years with 6 children. IBM encouraged their employees to be involved in the community and Jeannette became involved in politics and many organizations. Perhaps all of those changes and community involvement have prepared her for aging. She has learned to adapt to new things and as she ages adapting to new environments is easier. Additionally she keeps busy during the day with her routine of going to church every morning and afterwards going to the "Goodie Shop" for coffee and socializing with her friends. In the afternoon, she does what ever chores she needs to do and volunteers her time to the Commission on the Aging. She said it's really just a matter of mind over matter. She does not expect to accomplish too much and is very content. Jeannette Sweeney talked about the loss of her husband and how she felt like half a person afterwards. He took care of lots of things, so there was a transition period to go through. She talked about the benefits of the support group she has joined.

Ellen Burnett talked about growing up in Michigan and her experiences in the theatre. Eventually she moved to Sherman and became involved in the theatre there. Ellen and her late husband started the Citizen News when they were in their 40's. She has thought about selling the paper and moving to a far off land such as Africa, but her heart is here. She loves working and the environment in Sherman and New Fairfield. Many of Ellen's very intense moments fade quickly as she ages.

Chuck Finnegan visits the Senior Center on a regular basis. He likes to keep active and attributes his health to physical exercise and weight training. He is grateful for the

support of his wife of over 40 years. If you learn from your mistakes then he is the youngest person in the room and his favorite saying is "He will be dead before he is old."

Questions and Answers from the Audience:

Maureen Salerno opened the floor up to questions from the audience. There were questions on memory pills both over the counter and prescription. Dr. Herrick believed that most of the memory pills out there are not effective. There is lots of camaraderie at the Senior Center and the best way to retain your memory is a healthy diet and movement, whether it be exercising or getting involved. Further discussion focused on going back to school. Some colleges will allow you to audit a course for free, so you have the benefits of taking the class at no charge. There was further discussion on medical and neurological problems.

The Community Forum was adjourned at 12:00 noon.