

November 24, 2017

### I Was a Senior Center Snob

The end of 2017 is quickly approaching and I've been reflecting on this year. You see in March I turned 65 and when I did I decided the twelve months following it were going to be all about me. That seems selfish doesn't it? But what better year than a person's 65<sup>th</sup> to start looking at what they have achieved, what they still want to do and what needs to change to make those new realities occur?

Did you know you can join the Bozeman Senior Center at the age of fifty? You can, but I waited until I was in my sixties to join. I confess that the first few years I didn't do much with my yearly membership. You see, I didn't think it could have much that would interest me. After all I was only in my early sixties, healthy, had friends, liked a vigorous workout – certainly the senior center wouldn't offer that – and hadn't worked jigsaw puzzles in years. Oh I knew it had a nice wood working shop, but I don't do that and it has a nice store called Second Hand Rose that I would check out occasionally, but really what could it offer me? I had a very narrow view of what the senior center offered its members.

For many years I had the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors of a local non-profit called Befrienders. They serve a component of the senior population that benefits from a volunteer meeting with them for just one hour a week for companionship and support while playing games, going out for an activity or lunch or even grocery shopping. The reason I mention that is the Befrienders office is in the Bozeman Senior Center so I often went there to see the Executive Director. But while there what I observed were a lot of older people sitting around and visiting, working on a jigsaw puzzle, reading, napping and eating lunch together. It didn't seem very exciting and it started forming an image in my mind that the senior center would never be a place for me. However, I didn't look very deeply into what else the senior center offered. Perhaps we only look for what we want to see. Did I go into the senior center with some pre-conceived notions and that was what I looked for in its activities?

I had the opportunity to grow up with my dad's mom living with us. As I look back on my childhood I remember when I thought people, like my parents, in their forties were old and people in their sixties were ancient so at sixty five am I ancient? Remember when you were ten or fourteen and you looked at people in their fifties and sixties and all you saw were wrinkles on their faces and how they sat around and watched T V? My dad's mom was not able to live on her own, but my mom's parents did and they lived active lives. But the one who influenced me the most was the grandmother who lived with us. She had beautiful white hair, diabetes, a lot of wrinkles and she crocheted. As a young woman (we sometimes forget that elderly people were once young) she was a teacher in a one room school house in Illinois and she had a lot of patience with me. I had a severe speech impediment and she is the one who worked with me to overcome it. She literally gave me my voice.

Every summer we went to at least two family reunions and yes they were full of "old people" who again seemed to sit around and talk about the past and only the past. Being young I was looking to the future not the past so I didn't understand the fascination with reminiscing about the past. The reunions were another part of what formed my views of old age and people in the "twilight years of their lives" as it was referred to.

We often don't realize what is influencing us and to what degree until we get older and start viewing the world from our childhood preconceived notions. It's called a World View - how we see the world and it can be hard to change those views. But then I turned sixty-five.

There is nothing magical about that number. I was already a grandma with seven grandchildren, I have wrinkles and I like to talk about the past with them, especially with my son's two daughters. I share stories with them about their Scandinavian great grandmother and I tell them stories about my childhood so they will better understand where they come from and the foundation of the World View they are forming for their lives.

It sounds like a lot of the things that I observed as a child are now coming out in me as they are in people at the Bozeman Senior Center and thousands of other senior centers in the United States and the world. A place where people can gather with other people who understand them as they share like interests and memories where they can laugh together and support one another.

I started this by saying I decided to make these twelve months of my sixty fifth year of life about me so let's step back to March of this year and how it came to be that I am now a regular at the Bozeman Senior Center and discovered that I was a Senior Center Snob who thought it could never offer me anything that would interest me.

Every month an insert called Prime, which says it's a "Magazine For Mature Adults" is put in our local newspaper the Chronicle and is delivered to thousands of homes throughout Gallatin County. In April it arrived in our home and as I looked through it for the first time I saw that the Bozeman Senior Center offered a "Creative Writing" group. I am not a writer and would never claim to be, but I do like putting words to paper and used to do a lot of it and as I thought about it I decided I would go to the creative writing group and see what it was about. After all, perhaps a part of these twelve months being about me could include writing and begin the process of putting down the stories that I was telling Kali and Satory, my granddaughters, on to paper.

My first Tuesday at the group was April 4<sup>th</sup> and I have become a regular member. I don't always have something to read but I go so I can hear what the other members have written. Betty writes poetry and loves to write poems for her friends, co-workers and other volunteers at the senior center. Betty arrives very early at the senior center every day to start setting up for Meals on Wheels. Her dedication to the program is an inspiration to others who observe her but even more so when you realize she is in her eighties.

Another member of the group is Joy and her name describes her personality. She is a complete joy to be around and she is a volunteer at the senior center. She helps put the place settings on the tables for lunch and she is also in her eighties.

The Bozeman Senior Center offers a variety of exercise classes from strength training and core classes to an aerobics plus class that has a participant sweating laughing and realizing the class is not for sissies. There is gentle aerobics, Tai Chi and yoga and other exercise classes to fit people's needs and interests. Who knew it offered so many options and the cost for all of them is only an additional \$10.00 a month. Oh, do you like to line dance? You can do that at the senior center too.

I recently had my yearly physical and as the doctor was running through his litany of questions he asked if I was still working out and I said yes, but not where I had been. I told him I was now working out at the Bozeman Senior Center and I was ready for a dubious look from him and I got it. I laughed and told him about the various exercise classes it offers and told him about the classes I was doing. He was surprised by all that I was telling him and I challenged him to come to the Bozeman Senior Center on his day off and do the Core and Aerobics Plus classes with me and learn more about the center. He was like me and had a preconceived notion about senior centers and members and it did not jive with what I was telling

him. I was starting to break his ideas of what a senior center offers its members and that they don't just sit around on rocking chairs working jig saw puzzles or taking naps.

Senior centers are a place to socialize, find volunteer opportunities, come together for meals and participate in programs that utilize a person's skills. The Bozeman Senior Center offers exercise classes but also hiking and walking programs in the summer and cross country skiing in the winter. There is a recreation room, and a computer center where you can use the computers or have one-on-one instruction. There are travel opportunities and health services like blood pressure checks and foot clinics.

As I spend more time at the senior center I realize how narrow minded I was about what they offer to so many different needs and interests. There are other senior centers in our area. They include: Belgrade, Manhattan, Three Forks, Pony and Livingston. This past fall we had a group come in from another large town in Montana who were in the area for a day trip and they stopped at the Bozeman Senior Center and I happened to be there at the time. It was fascinating for me to watch them and listen to their comments about our senior center. It was larger than theirs, offered more opportunities than theirs did and they were amazed by the Second Hand Rose Thrift Store – they practically bought it out. It felt like locust descending on Eastern Montana. I think we can take for granted what the Bozeman Senior Center offers its members who range in age from fifty to ninety-five and older.

Let me ask you a few questions. Do you like to play bridge or cribbage? Would you like to join a book club? Would you like to learn how to play the guitar or join a singing group? Would you like to go to Greece, take a cruise to Alaska or go to Branson Missouri? Those are just a few of the many opportunities that the Bozeman Senior Center offers.

Let me ask you one last question. Did you know all of this existed at the Bozeman Senior Center? If you don't live in Bozeman do you know what the senior center in your community offers relatives or yourself? Or are you like I was, a Senior Center Snob who somehow thinks your above it and therefore don't look into all of its marvelous programs and people who are there just waiting for you to come and be an integral instrumental part of a vibrant community?

Don't wait, as a whole new world awaits you when you walk through the doors of your local senior center.

Andrea (Andi) Woodley