

## **On the Senior Agenda: Jane's Story**

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This year the Senior Agenda Coalition and our partner group, the Rhode Island Organizing Project, have been arranging meetings of seniors with their legislators to ask for restoration of 1.8 million dollars that have been cut from senior services since 2008. During our meetings, we share stories with our state senators and representatives about "aging in community." One of the best stories came from a senior I'll call "Jane" (not her real name).

Jane had been an active and successful banker who enjoyed working as part of a team in a fast-paced environment well into her 70's. However, at age 73 her open-heart surgery forced her into an unplanned retirement. She found that having lots of free time was a real mixed blessing. An avid reader, she now enjoyed delving into the books she had never had time for. But as she tells it, "as each day passed without contact with other people, living alone in a quiet house, it became more and more depressing." Finally she looked in the yellow pages and discovered there was a senior center in her city.

With some skepticism, thinking "it would just be a bunch of old people sitting around", she peeked into the center. Much to her surprise, a line dancing class was underway---she loved to dance. Soon she found a bevy of activities that matched her interests: a book club, drama club, exercise classes and trips. She made new friends. The center encouraged her to develop an untapped talent---writing. She wrote a hilarious narrative essay entitled "Beloved Ancient Warriors" that she shared with me. It recounts a day at the senior center and it's "cast of characters." It begins with the van driver "who drives the van like her personal tank...no car dare try to illegally pass her or cross in front of her. To this mama tiger, we're all her cubs." Jane found many activities had a common denominator---humor. The audience chuckles when a drama club member muffs a line in a play. Book club discussions frequently morph into political debates. The volunteer group has monthly meetings with 3<sup>rd</sup> year medical students to show them how to "deal with the geriatric crowd."

Jane's experience dovetails with findings from a recent longitudinal study about senior isolation and depression. It measured a group of 6,500 seniors for objective indicators of social isolation, e.g., whether married or co-habiting, having regular contact with family members and friends, belonging to a social club or other group, having someone you can talk to about important matters. Then it tracked these seniors for the next seven years. After accounting for other factors (such as health) between the group of seniors who were socially isolated and those who weren't, it found that social isolation made group members 26% more likely to have died during those seven years. Its conclusion: too much time without human contact can kill you.

I would put it positively: a senior center experience like Jane's can save your life, and a daily check-in with a Meals on Wheels volunteer or even a respite care worker can help you live longer. To our legislators I say, "Please restore funding for these programs, it's a matter of life and death."