

FIERCELY INDEPENDENT ELDERS

A wise man once wrote in his diary,
“Old age is the most UNEXPECTED of all things that happen to a man.”

A group of friends who knew each other well, decided to deal with the ‘unexpectedness’ and inevitability of old age. They read the literature, discussed the problems with health and counseling professionals, and decided to form an organization in 1990. They believed this was important because the rural community of Union didn’t have a lot of services available and they felt the support and intentional access to each other might be a good idea. They called themselves F.I.E, Fiercely Independent Elders.

The organization started as a nonprofit organization with four individuals and over time grew to ten. The original members were Ray and Patt Hanson (my parents), Jean Moore (a neighborhood of St. Andrews for most of her adult life), and Elaine Cook (who lived about the town of Union). There were joined by Betty Ross Graves, Pete Merrill, and two couples from Shelton, Mildred and Harvey Warnaca and Bill and Dixie Stinchfield.

Their purpose was to grow old with grace, dignity and attuned to the changing world.

F.I.E.’s goals were:

1. To stay in their own homes as long as possible.
2. To preserve their independence.
3. To increase the pleasure, richness and usefulness of their lives by sharing information and concerns.
4. To establish individual’s goals to minimize concerns relative to physical, mental, social, and financial planning needs.
5. To generally foster a feeling of “well-being” in their old age.

The structure for obtaining independence from retirement and nursing institutions and/or families during periods of illness, accident or other restrictive situations were twofold:

- A cooperative and supportive relationship among the members themselves would sustain the commitment to aging well.
- Facilitators with knowledge in suitable social services and the intimate understanding of our “norms” would regularly monitor the physical and mental health and the home environment of each member and help find any services needed.

The group had lunch together at Mason General Hospital prior to their monthly business meeting. In addition to the regular business they had a ritual called “the Organ Recital.” No one played music but the members took turns telling each other how they and their loved ones were doing, with brevity, reality, and good humor like this: “Betty visited a dermatologist—didn’t know before, but learned she is thin-skinned. And reported “severe degeneration of her spine; she wondered if that made her a degenerate?” “Ray has a cold and feels miserable.” “Bill’s cat has fleas.” “Mildred is OK and Harvey is lovely.” Their humor was not only infectious, but life-sustaining.

Over their time together, they had two facilitators, one a social work case manager and one R.N./psychotherapist. In the beginning the facilitator would visit members individually on a regular basis and meet with the group once a month. This network of mutual contact and caring support gave them a “safe place to fall” and enabled them to stay in their own homes. Over time, as age and circumstances changed, they found that the regular visits from facilitators were no longer needed, though they were available on call.

Early on the group was involved with local activities such as the literacy program, volunteering with a local college, sponsoring the annual county spelling bee, and hospital fundraising. They took part in book clubs and cooking clubs, CPR training and a safe driving group, and were active in a local hiking group called the “Walkie Talkies. They also were politically active, bringing a much-needed bus route to Union, encouraging development of home health and support services in Mason County, and ensuring physician directives were honored at the local hospital.

The F.I.E.s explored the meaning of their aging and what quality of life meant to them. One said, “Aging is like being an expatriate from the mainstream. But it’s OK after you meet other expatriates.” Ageism contributed to one member’s feeling visible in F.I.E. but invisible in society, “as if I’m in an alien culture sometimes.” Others described quality of life as connection/connectedness with others, being involved in family relationships, lack of severe pain, mobility, people to love and be loved by, the ability to laugh, a sense of curiosity and adventure, stimulation from others, being able to share life experiences, and feeling that life is meaningful. Family was paramount in their considerations—they even called their adult “kids” pre-F.I.E.s.

When asked how F.I.E. helps them, members said:

- It clears away some of the mist of uncertainty and helps me evaluation my desires and options.
- It empowers me; it frees me to live in the NOW.

- F.I.E. provides a kind of family companionship that adds energy, enthusiasm and a certain spice to life.
- We have grown in F.I.E. in our ability to share.
- F.I.E. helps with a sense of humor, to see the funny side of life.

Over the years the desire to share their experiences with others on Hood Canal and to expand the camaraderie they felt for one another led them to begin weekly social gatherings at Harmony Hill, open to all friends and neighbors in Union. The attendance varied from 6 to 20. They drank wine, shared information, told stories, sampled homemade breads and the latest fad in soda water, played music, read their poems and plays, and invited speakers on local affairs. They were welcomed to the Cottage (still now a part of Sacred Waters) and continued meeting there for many years.

*"People are in denial that aging will happen... maybe to others, but not to me.
We in FIE believe that when the corner is turned it is very often too late
for the planning that is needed to make old age a success."*

