

## Creating community

by Stephan Russo  
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**The all-volunteer Bloomingdale Aging in Place provides UWS seniors with an active social life and a sense of civic involvement**



Arlene Seffern (far right) with her BAiP-sponsored knitting group. Photo: Stephan Russo

question for themselves by creating an all-volunteer network called Bloomingdale Aging in Place (BAiP). Their mission was to build community among older adults who live between West 96th and 110th Streets. From a block association newsletter survey and a steering committee meeting, residents were asked what was most needed to help their elderly neighbors stay in their homes. The overwhelming response was the need for an active social life and connection to other residents who were concerned about feeling isolated.

Fast forward ten years, and what began as a handful of volunteer group activities and helping-hand visits has blossomed into an a full-blown organization with over 1200 members, 70 group activities, and panel discussions and social events organized by the volunteers themselves.

Why are efforts like BAiP so necessary today? The data is very clear about the shifts in our population. The baby boomer generation leaving the workforce is becoming one of the fastest growing demographics. In New York City alone, the Department for the Aging projects that by the year 2040 the number of residents over the age of 60 will rise to close to 2 million — over 20 percent of the population.

There is probably no city in the country that does more than New York to create a safety net of programs that enables residents to stay in their homes and continue to live productive and

The term “Aging in Place” has become imbedded in our lexicon when discussing the realities of growing old and the importance of staying active. “In place” means New Yorkers are not leaving the city or running off to retire elsewhere. And who can blame them? What better place to spend these years than in this beloved city that offers myriad opportunities for continued personal growth and civic involvement?

In 2009, a group of active West Siders decided to answer this

meaningful lives. Some of these services are geared for lower-income seniors, but the public investment is clearly aimed at ensuring that all of our neighbors continue to thrive as they age.

Over ten years ago, the city launched its Age-Friendly NYC initiative to address the needs of an aging population. The project has focused on civic engagement, housing, public spaces, transportation and health and social services. The current city leadership has increased funding over the prior administration by more than \$82 million dollars to improve its more than 250 senior centers, decrease home-care waiting lists, provide weekend meals to those receiving home-delivered food and enhancing its case management services.

I recently joined BAiP as I retired last year from my career in the non-profit sector. I also just turned 67 and am facing the challenge of figuring out how to spend my next twenty-plus years (depending on the actuarial assumptions I use). Last November, I moved my 92 year-old mother to a senior residence in Florida when she decided she could no longer tolerate the NYC winters. Like many of my sandwich generation, I recognized through helping her how challenging life can be as the aging process kicks into high gear.

Last month I attended a BAiP panel discussion led by two knowledgeable attorneys titled “Over My Dead Body.” I thought there would be few attendees, but when I entered the second floor of the Bloomingdale library on West 100th Street, I encountered a throng of more than 100 people who had gathered to learn about wills, revocable trusts, health proxies and what happens to your apartment if you are alone and die in the hospital. (Did you know that you could disinherit your children but not your spouse?)

Want to feel uplifted? Sit in on one of BAiP’s activities.

Arlene Seffern is 82 years old, and used to work in a knitting store on Broadway. She also spent part of her working life as a bookkeeper at several non-profit organizations. Arlene felt that she had a special artistic ability. Her weekly BAiP knitting group has become a godsend to her. “Every time I am in my knitting group, my face lights up,” Arlene said. “I get so much joy out of teaching the group and the members care deeply for each other. When one group member was having cataract surgery and had no one to be with her, another member picked her up and stayed with her.”

It was a wonderful example of what BAiP calls N2N — its Neighbor-to-Neighbor program — and considers a core organizing principle. Caitlin Hawke, one of the many forces behind BAiP, characterizes the effort as “connecting democracy to action.”

“It’s like threading a needle between having a structure and encouraging members to create opportunities themselves,” Hawke said.

Membership is open if you live within the area bounded by West 96th and 110th Streets from Riverside Drive to Central Park West. To learn how more about BAiP and how you can become involved, visit their website at [bloominplace.org](http://bloominplace.org) or call 212-842-8831.

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