



Social Connections Key to Age-Friendly Lehigh Valley

On a Sunday afternoon in May, 71-year-old Carol Gonzalez heard a knock on her door. It was Mother's Day, more than a year into the pandemic, and when she opened it, Carol found 8-year-old Nika waiting outside with bouquet of flowers. "Oh, you are so thoughtful!" Carol cried as she wrapped Nika in a big hug.

Though Carol lives alone, she's created a sense of community through working full-time, remaining active in civic engagement and volunteering with organizations like Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania, where she met Nika.

"Girl Scouts has enriched my life, because it allows me to transfer skills, knowledge, morals and values to the younger generation. I have been able to watch them mature into go-getters, innovators, risk takers and leaders. Most of all, I show them love and respect which I get back tenfold," said Carol.

"They also keep me young," she added. "Being an older adult in the Lehigh Valley doesn't have to be boring and lonely. It can be fun and rewarding if you reach outside of yourself and get involved."

That's why Carol's involved with Age-Friendly Lehigh Valley, a coalition led by United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley dedicated to building a community where everyone has the opportunity to age successfully.

"Carol's such a great example of how an age-friendly community builds intergenerational connections that make all residents feel safe, included and supported. They keep individuals socially connected and engaged in community life and they enhance opportunities to be healthy and active," said Carmen Bell, Director of Healthy Aging for United Way.

Bell adds that the recent pandemic exacerbated a growing issue among the region's older adults. A new survey of Lehigh Valley seniors reveals that one in four respondents report that they lack companionship and one in six report feeling isolated from others. Older adults who are chronically lonely live shorter lives and are more likely to have problems with memory, mental health and physical health. "That's why we're prioritizing social inclusion and participation in our Age-Friendly Lehigh Valley action plan," said Bell.

At the height of the pandemic, Bell and her team at United Way worked with partners and volunteers to contact approximately 2,000 seniors at risk of loneliness or isolation due to senior center closures.

With your support, we can continue to keep our older adults safe, healthy and connected as we build an Age-Friendly Lehigh Valley. Give today to the Community Building Fund to help your neighbors access the resources they need to rebuild and recover.