

## Staying connected as we age

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Our society is not physically capable of providing a professional care environment for every future elder, nor would every elder want one. Nevertheless, as a society we have become increasingly reliant upon professional care and services to support us through all aspects of life and death. The result is that as we age many of us become physically, socially, and psychologically isolated.

### Encouraging connectedness

The irony is that we want and even need to be engaged, to have our lives still have purpose from one day to the next. We want and need to stay connected—to feel that our lives have real significance.

Social connectedness and community involvement are two of the most powerful determinants of health and well-being, while loneliness hastens the declines that come with age. Nonetheless, the idea of promoting connectedness is rarely discussed as an intervention strategy necessary to support aging well.

Generations of Hope Communities (GHCs) are designed specifically to encourage connectedness between and among multiple generations. They are based on the belief that to have a good life, to flourish, we need to remain connected—to have in our daily life friends and family who understand us, care about us, and want to be with us.

In contemplating what being connected really looks like for older adults living in a GHC, I thought about Bill Biederman and his wife Fran who helped to develop the GHC model of neighborhood care.

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## Bill Biederman

Bill moved to Hope Meadows at age 59. He loved to cook; his specialty was chili. He would make big batches of it and invite kids in for dinner. Bill also enjoyed fixing their bicycles. But most of all he just listened to their stories — sad and happy ones. He loved it when he would be in Walmart and a child from Hope, regardless of race, would come up to him and say “Hi Grandpa” and give him a big hug.

Bill told author Wes Smith, for the book *Hope Meadows*:

*I'd mostly been sitting home feeling sorry for myself before we moved to Hope. I couldn't work for fear of having another heart attack. Fran wanted to get me up and going again. Living here has done that. It's giving me something to do. I'm helping these kids. There is a general loving and caring for each other here. The seniors take care of the children and vice versa.*

Bill died of a liver disease two months before his 67th birthday. In the weeks before his death, Hope Meadows residents and staff pulled together to support both Bill and Fran. We would take Bill back and forth to the hospital 20 miles away; we collected medical equipment and furniture needed to enable him to remain at home; and we sat with him when Fran had to run errands. Recognizing that the end was near, one by one we came to say goodbye. Bill gave back until the end, telling each of us how much we meant to him. What a gift, but especially for the children who, before coming to Hope, had rarely heard words of gratitude or appreciation for just being themselves.

## Grandma Fran

At his funeral two of Bill's Hope grandchildren served as pallbearers, and another read a poem she and her mother had written titled Grandpa Bill. Later that day, kids gathered at the Hope community center to write sympathy notes to Grandma Fran. In groups of three, they walked across the street to her house to deliver them. Here are just two, from a pair of brothers who were ages 14 and 12 at the time:



A child stops to chat with Bill Biederman in the carport of his apartment at Hope Meadows. (Photo credit: Alex Harris)

*Dear Grandma Fran,*

*I'm sorry that Grandpa Bill died. He was nice and funny. I enjoyed spending time with him. And we will always remember grandpa bill [sic]. And we will always keep him in our prayers.*

*Dear Grandma Fran,*

*I want you to know that if you need anything you can call on me. I am very sorry for his death. If you need a liver or something, I'll find you one. That's all I can do. But anyway, if you want to talk about anything, you can call me. If you need help moving anything, call me.*

Now, many years later, Fran still gets misty eyed when she thinks about those notes.

## Staying connected as we age

In this time when too many older adults lead lonely lives, and I would add, in this time of too much discord, too much child abuse, and too many overworked and overwhelmed parents, it is Bill and Fran, the children, parents and seniors at Hope Meadows, and so many others who live in GHCs who are showing us that life does not have to be this way.

It is easy to forget just how essential to our own sense of well-being are the reciprocal acts of kindness that connect us everyday, *e.g.* making chili for neighbors, taking time to really listen, giving and receiving hugs, writing notes to let people know we care or actually telling people how much they mean to us.

As we consider how to support our elders, we must not underestimate the significance of the everyday magic of these reciprocal intergenerational acts of care and kindness—acts that connect us and provide the context for aging well.

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