



Chatham Council on Aging: A "Center Of Activity"

by Katharine Dalton

Take a ride up Stony Hill Road in Chatham – if you're not familiar with it, it runs from Crowell Road to Orleans Road – and you'll find a large building on the left-hand side painted white with blue shutters. This is the Chatham Senior Center, home of the Council on Aging (COA). The building exudes a feeling of calm solidity but inside is a scene of much activity.

I've been working at the COA since November 22, 2002 (my mother's birthday). My responsibilities are to produce *The Flash*, our monthly newsletter, and work as a receptionist each afternoon.

I enjoy talking to the visitors because at a certain age, it seems to me, it becomes easier to speak your mind, especially in a jocular way. One sweet old lady told me, when I admired her cane, "I don't know where I got it."

"And," she continued, "I have two more at home and I don't know where they came from either. Maybe I'm a kleptomaniac," she said laughing.

Then there was the woman who mentioned that she no longer had an escort since her husband passed away. I said I was in the same boat. "Well," she said, "if I come across one, I'll give you a call." It was nice that she was willing to share.

At the Senior Center, an elevator services the three floors. On the street level, you'll find a dining room/meeting room, kitchen with complimentary coffee and tea, a sitting room with the day's local newspapers and a variety of magazines, a reception area and staff offices.

Upstairs we have a lending library, computer school, more offices, a room with greeting cards for sale, and another sitting room. On the lower level, exercise classes are held, along with a monthly movie, and various group meetings.

In a typical week, seniors can take an exercise class, have lunch, join the Thursday afternoon knitting group and enjoy a friendly game of bridge or Scrabble. We have free hearing tests each week as well as a free blood pressure clinic.

Our free Van Service will take Chatham residents to local errands, grocery shopping, and doctor's appointments. Our van can accept wheelchairs and comes with a lift.

When the dreaded tax time rolls around each year, we provide free tax return assistance. Our Colin Campbell Computer School provides beginning and advanced classes. On Fridays a SHINE counselor is there to offer free health information. Experts in health care are invited to speak on current issue important to seniors.

Those are the scheduled activities. Then there are the unscheduled, casual events; people dropping by for coffee and conversation (for instance, a visit to the weekly men's group), a visit to the lending library or to buy greeting cards, or perhaps a visit to use our public computer.

Our outreach coordinators help people seeking financial advice or caregiver help. They also loan out walkers or wheelchairs free of charge.

All of this is handled by a staff of five people, with the help of wonderful, caring volunteers. We could not do it without our volunteers. The Friends of the COA, our non-profit, fundraising group, solicits funds in order to provide needed money for all special events held at the COA. They also help seniors in need.

Now for some names: First on the list is Mandi Speakman our new director, who grew up in Harwich. She joined us at the

end of July and has been a blessing. Mandi has a master's degree in Gerontology from UMass Boston. She was COA Director in Bourne for two years before joining us in Chatham. She has a strong commitment to helping people.



"I think the Council on Aging is important in every town but particularly in Chatham," says Mandi. "The satisfaction from doing my job here comes from supporting not only the seniors but the caregivers in the community. I think there are a lot of caregivers who need that kind of support."

She tells this story from her training sessions, about children visiting a senior center. One of the first things the kids said was, "Where are the beds?" Their perception of a Senior Center was like a nursing home, instead of a wellness center.

Mandi continues, "There are a number of people in the community who have needs and they don't know where to turn. I think our role is to support them, provide them with direct service when we can, provide them with the information and the hand holding and the phone call; to help people stay home with their loved ones, surrounded by their own things for as long as possible."

The longevity prize goes to Pauline Hoerner, who has been Secretary here since 1994. Prior to coming to Chatham, she worked for the Springfield School System. She loves to meet people and makes visitors feel at home.

Penny Forsman is the director of our Nutrition Program and a few years ago took on the added task of Outreach Coordinator. She took care of her parents during their last years. She has 17 years of experience in real estate. She is an extremely caring person with a bizarre sense of humor.

When I started my interview with her, the first thing she said was, "I'm here under the Federal Witness Protection Program."

Eva Souza, our newest Outreach Coordinator, joined us this month. She also has personal experience as a family caregiver. She has a graduate degree in Gerontology from UMass Boston and is currently pursuing a certificate degree in Geriatric Care Management.

These people care very much about their work. Our mission statement states in part, "The COA identifies the needs of Seniors in the community and works toward developing, coordinating and promoting programs and services to meet these needs...to enhance the dignity, support the independence and promote the general health and wellbeing of Chatham's older adults."

After spending years in the corporate world where the bottom line was profit, it is a pleasure to be part of a company that asks when you enter, "How can we help you?" And they mean it. I enjoy my part in all this good work. I enjoy the camaraderie, the team attitude, and the desire to help people.



Katharine Dalton moved to Chatham in the early 1980s after 17 years at Arthur D. Little, a management-consulting firm headquartered in Cambridge.

She operated a bookstore in Chatham, Papyrus - Mostly Books, for seven years. She has been chair of the Chatham Public Ceremonies Committee and the Chatham Housing Authority, as well as treasurer of the Chatham Cultural Council. She studied journalism at Cape Cod Community College.

Since 2002 Katharine has worked at the Chatham Senior Center, where she produces a monthly newsletter, helps in the receptionist's office and facilitates a book club. She enjoys reading, writing (but not arithmetic) and spending time with her friends.

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