

For some seniors, a cultural shift and a vital volunteerism



CHRISTINE HOCHKEPPEL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Nauset Neighbors volunteer Frank Bridges, 66, changed the batteries in a smoke detector for Ann Miller, 79, seated with Judy Gordon, on July 3.

By [Robert Weisman](#)

GLOBE STAFF JULY 07, 2018

BREWSTER — When it got too hot for her to sleep with a fan and she could no longer lift her air conditioner, 79-year-old Ann Miller turned to her village.

Not her bayside town on the Lower Cape, but Nauset Neighbors, a grass-roots network of seniors dedicated to helping other seniors live independently. The volunteer members of Nauset, one of more than 15 self-styled

“villages” statewide, draw inspiration from the ethic of small-town New England life in an earlier era, when folks looked after one another.

Miller’s request for help was answered by Frank Bridges, who pulled up to her modest town house in his pickup truck on a sweltering July morning. Bridges, 66, a retired banker who lives across town, greeted Miller and went straight to work. He removed her window screen, set the air conditioner in place, and screwed it in securely. Before he left, Bridges, who is 6-foot-5, also replaced three of her smoke alarm batteries without aid of a stepladder.

“Now I’m all set for the summer,” Miller said gratefully.

Volunteers like Bridges are at the heart of Nauset Neighbors and about 350 other groups that have sprung up around the United States and globally. The village movement, which originated in Boston, is part of a wave of volunteerism gathering strength at a time when governments are strapped for cash. Villages have become increasingly vital for older Massachusetts residents who want to age in their own homes, but live far from other family members.

“There’s been a cultural shift,” said Alice Bonner, the Massachusetts secretary of elder affairs. “Families aren’t living in the same geographic communities. And younger neighbors are often stressed with work and kids. Maybe they’re not looking across the fence to see if their older neighbors are all right.”

The village movement got its start in 2002, when 11 friends and neighbors formed Beacon Hill Village as a mutual support network. Back then, the expectation was that “when you’re 65, you check your brain and let other people take care of you,” said cofounder Susan McWhinney-Morse. “We didn’t want to do that, and we didn’t want to go anywhere.”

As word spread, Beacon Hill Village attracted interest and visitors from all corners of the country and overseas. Since then, aging support villages have cropped up from rural New Hampshire to as far away as Finland and South Korea. Massachusetts is the [epicenter](#), and more villages are being formed from Dorchester to Waltham to Dennis and Yarmouth.

“It’s about matching the village to the nature and culture of your community,” said Tom Mottl, a retired electrical engineer who helped start the Reading Neighbors Network in that community and organized a workshop at Brandeis University last month for other groups seeking to launch villages.

The villages have sprouted organically, but the Baker administration has become an active supporter of the movement. Last year, it awarded \$75,000 in grants to support villages organizing in Yarmouth, the Berkshires, the Central Massachusetts town of Petersham, and four rural communities north of Springfield.

Each village has its own character and structure, electing its own governing board and charging its own membership fees. The cost to join ranges from \$75 for single members and \$95 for households at all-volunteer

Nauset, which serves a half-dozen Cape Cod towns, to \$675 for single members and \$975 for households at Beacon Hill Village, which has a staff of six full-time and part-time workers. (Fees are often adjusted for members of modest means.) A small contingent of “concierge” villages employ paid staffers, but most rely exclusively on volunteers, who are often members themselves.

Lending a helping hand is the villages’ lifeblood. Their brigades of volunteers — often only a decade or two younger than the folks they’re helping — provide rides to the doctor or grocery store for members who can no longer drive, and check in on house-bound older members. They also haul summer lawn furniture out of the basement, connect hoses, and on occasion even remove bats from attics.

Some villages also function as local lobbying groups, advocating for public improvements like sidewalk curb cuts and other “age-friendly” policies. Most offer referrals, helping members connect with area businesses, care providers, and senior services. And for many, social activities, from book groups to lectures to museum visits, are a popular draw.

“When you’re a widow and it’s a Friday night, this lets you meet people you can go to a play with,” said Ann Schummers, an organizer of the Concord After 60 village.

Residents age 60 and over now make up more than 20 percent of the state’s population, according to the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute, and more than half the people in some towns on the Cape. With that cohort expanding and growing older, aging in place has become the rallying cry for those resistant to moving into senior housing or retirement villages in Florida or Arizona.



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BREWSTER - Nauset Neighbors volunteer Frank Bridges, 66, installs an air conditioning unit for Ann Miller, 79, Tuesday, July 3, 2018.

For most seniors today, “there’s a desire to stay put,” said Kathy Burnes, director of services for older adults at Jewish Family & Children’s Service in Waltham.

Municipalities provide some senior services, ranging from nutrition to fitness programs to crisis intervention. But local communities are finding themselves hard-pressed to keep up with the “age wave,” said Judi Wilson, director of the Council on Aging in Harwich.

“Government can’t do everything,” Wilson said. “There’s a greater need for support than ever.”

While the local senior centers remain active, many retirees shy away from their organized activities because they don’t want to think of themselves as old. They feel more comfortable with the peer-to-peer networking, and the social gatherings, offered by their villages.

Others simply want help lifting their air conditioners. Miller, who joined Nauset Neighbors in 2015, plays bridge with her friends and volunteers at her church and for charities. She’s typical of many village members who continue to drive and remain socially engaged but can’t handle all the household chores she once managed.

“When my kids are here, I have them do things,” said Miller, whose husband, Robert, died about 20 years ago.

But her son lives in Georgia and her daughter in Norfolk, nearly a two-hour drive from Brewster in summer traffic.

Bridges, the volunteer who put the air conditioner in her window and changed her smoke alarm batteries, sold his New Jersey home and moved to Brewster when he retired in 2016. He remembers his mother growing older on the Cape when he and his siblings lived out of state.

“We had to rely on other people to help her,” he said. “This is karmic payback for me.”

After leaving Miller’s town house, Bridges was off to drive another older woman to a rehab appointment in Orleans.

When Nauset Neighbors formed nine years ago, the reaction of local officials who provided senior services “varied from outright hostile to ignoring us,” said Dick Elkin, a founding director of the village. But relations have since warmed, with both parties now referring older residents to services offered by the other and viewing their activities as complementary.

“Nauset Neighbors fills gaps, doing things we’re not able to do,” said Mandi Speakman, director of the Chatham Council on Aging, noting that the village deploys hundreds of volunteers who can transport residents to medical appointments as far away as Hyannis.

In some of the newer villages with less affluent populations, organizers are attempting to bridge cultural differences between diverse communities of immigrants who speak a variety of languages. Bernadette Kaempf, who's organizing the Dorchester village, said she's been meeting in recent weeks with Spanish, Haitian, Vietnamese, and Cape Verdean residents.

"This isn't going to happen overnight," she admitted. "The culture is different in all those countries, but there's a lot of interest."

Volunteers in Waltham are reaching out to immigrants from countries such as India, Uganda, and Guatemala, and may start by setting up neighborhood "hamlets" within the villages, said organizer Steve Middlebrook.

"All of us feel that we don't know our neighbors well enough," he said, "and we want to make sure that people don't fall through the cracks."

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