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Serving the Venerable

W: Britt Bates
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How do we revere and support our elders as a culture? How do we band together as a community to take care of them and uphold their dignity and joy as they age?

These are questions that started to run through my mind recently, not only because my own Boomer parents will eventually age, but because I began to consider the different ways indigenous peoples across the globe care for their elders — who, more often than not, age in their own residences. It seems that our culture, in some ways, has lost touch with that tender dedication and community-based support.

Perhaps not for long, though, thanks to the important work of organizations like Better at Home, which aims to keep senior citizens living confidently and comfortably in their own homes, should they so prefer, and to provide them with the warm sense of community and connection that's so integral to wellbeing.

A Better at Home program run by the United Way is alive and well in Cranbrook — thanks to the compassionate dedication of its local program coordinator, Laurie Harris.

Laurie, who is incredibly warm, open, and friendly, explains to me on a drizzly winter afternoon how the program — now in its fifth year after several pilot programs — is almost entirely funded by the provincial government and operates in 67 communities across British Columbia, including Cranbrook. While government funding covers operational costs and basic necessities,

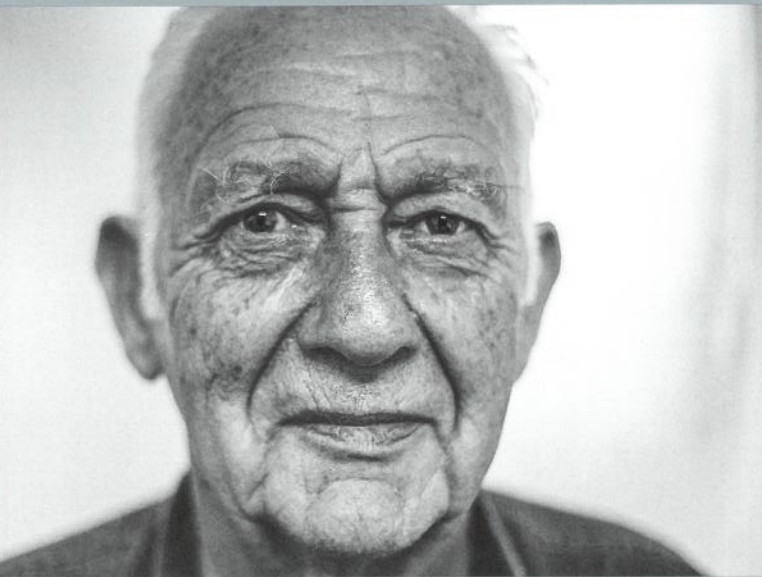
Laurie relies fairly heavily on volunteer support, which is always needed. “A little help goes a long way,” Laurie explains with her effortless smile.

Better at Home offers several initiatives, all of which ensure that senior citizens' non-medical needs are met; for example, a program called Drive lets volunteers chauffeur the elderly to appointments, shopping, and social functions. Volunteers can also help with some light snow shoveling, yard work, or offer their trades, as many local seniors are not financially able to hire out these services on their own. Sometimes the tasks that are needed are as simple as putting on a fitted bedsheet or doing a little laundry.

Other programs and initiatives that Better at Home offers are focused less on household chores and more on ensuring that individuals have access to a lively community and social connections. Laurie, along with the help of some youth from local schools and several dedicated volunteers, offers a twice-monthly luncheon, held at the Dwelling Place.

“It's the full affair, and everyone loves it,” Laurie happily explains of the event, which drew no less than 77 attendees the day before she and I spoke. “It's a beautiful home-cooked meal, with dessert, drinks, and the works, served on nice china and with fine silverware.”

But it's more than the elegant china, delicious food, and the Dwelling Place's high, vaulted, wooden ceilings that make the event so special. It's the opportunity for seniors to get out into the city, chat with others, and build long-lasting friendships and social networks.



“We know now that this sense of connection to others is necessary for mental health,” Laurie says. “The lack of it can lead to depression, which comes with a host of physical ailments, too.”

It’s clear that Laurie’s huge heart is fully extended to the aging members of her community, ensuring that they have the help they need while living life the way they choose. While many local senior citizens are beyond happy to live in care facilities such as Joseph Creek and Garden View, where they enjoy full-service care and accessible opportunities to connect with other residents, many other elderly — who would much prefer to live in their own homes — are what Laurie describes lovingly as “fiercely independent.” She adds with a chuckle, “Now those are two words I hear together a lot!”

Laurie works tirelessly to assure that independence is kept intact for as many individuals as possible. Laurie stays a step ahead — even keeping personal necessities such as toilet paper and briefs in her office closet in case she needs to run a quick drop-off, anticipating potential needs and ready to assist whoever needs it.

It takes a fair amount of labour though and incredibly stretched resources to keep Better at Home chugging along in Cranbrook. Laurie is immensely grateful for volunteer help, even if someone can only offer an hour or two every week or month.


“Just like with a child, on the other end of the spectrum, it really does take a village,” Laurie says. When I ask her what is most gratifying about this important and community-changing work, her smile is infectious. “I just want to help build the system that will take care of all of us.”

And that she is.

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Those interested in applying to volunteer with Better at Home can email Laurie directly at: betterathome@ccssebc.ca.

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