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New Horizons

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Donna Polk's Multicultural Journey of Service

By Leo Adam Biga

Donna L. Polk doesn't mince words. The 79-year-old CEO of the private nonprofit Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition (NUIHC) has long told it like it is as a human services administrator and community activist.

In 2022 she shepherded NUIHC opening its new \$16 million campus at 2226 N St. in South Omaha. It includes an administrative services building and an affordable housing complex with its own community center. A new health clinic is just opening. Programs for children and seniors are offered. NUIHC moved to its new location from its longtime site in downtown.

The organization serves an urban native population often invisible in mainstream society. Polk wants to ensure American Indians are heard and seen.

"People need to understand and appreciate how sovereign nations work and why they need to exist and most of all to respect the fact that this is their native land. I want people to think about that when they say or read the words Omaha and Nebraska," she said. "When people have to give up their land and move so someone else can be comfortable, it's traumatic. Gentrification really



NEW HORIZONS PHOTO

has a traumatic effect on people who are relocated and nobody has been relocated more than American Indians in this country.

"When people think North Omaha they think African Americans and when they think South Omaha they think Spanish-speaking individuals. So, where is the place for native people on whose land we stand?"

As symbolic representation of this

history, she said, the new campus includes a mural by nationally renowned artist Daniel Long Soldier. "I commissioned that fabulous mural so that people know this is native land. That's very important. I wanted people to be able to recognize this is who we are." NUIHC also supported a separate American Indian mural for the South Omaha Mural Project.

NUIHC was once based in South

Omaha.

"It's like coming home in many ways," she said. "We're just happy to be here. We want to contribute to the growth and development of this part of the city."

NUIHC's charged with elevating the health status and eliminating the disparities of urban Indians and other underserved populations through education, advocacy and health service delivery. It offers behavioral health and substance use disorder services and transitional housing. NUIHC also operates satellite facilities in Lincoln and Sioux City.

"If you are native and live on a rez," she said, "you have access to services – healthcare, housing, employment. But if you're living in an urban center you're often treated even worse than other people of color who share the space. Native people have health issues that cause disparities in terms of years of life lived and years of life lost."

Speaking truth to power, critiquing systemic racism and advocating for diversity-equity-inclusion are nothing new to Polk.

"I really used to be very vocal about wrongs."

When living and working in Lincoln she and a Jewish family she was friends with became targets

--Polk continued on page 16.



Mullen leaves mark at Central

After teaching history courses for 24 years, Rod Mullen decided it was the right time to retire. For his excellence in the classroom, Mullen received the 2022 History Nebraska Excellence in Teaching Award. Read more about Mullen's journey as a teacher on **Page 10**.

Merrymakers provide positive, quality music for older adults

By Ron Petersen

Music plays a prominent role in everyday life for many people.

People get enjoyment from music that ranges from jazz to rock to classical music, which elicits surprising reactions.

For some, music opens up a memory from a specific time and place that will never be forgotten.

Many benefit from the experience they get from music, including those at nursing homes, assisted living centers, senior centers, veterans' homes and hospice care around Nebraska and Iowa, provided by the Merrymakers Association.

"The seniors enjoy the music so much — it's a tremendous honor to serve seniors in this way," Merrymakers Association executive director, Sandy Lemke said. "It is so gratifying to see the impact that the

music has. Sometimes you see it in small ways and sometimes you see it in big ways."

The Merrymakers first started making an impact in the lives of older adults when Jim Johnson met with a group of Omaha businessmen to form the organization in 1986.

It started with one musician who performed at his mother's nursing home, but it slowly started to grow, as they added more musicians and more locations to the list.

"I've been doing 10 to 11 shows a month for 28 years," the fourth musician of the Merrymakers Association, Joe Taylor said. "I've been doing it so long that I don't think there isn't a place that I haven't sang at."

--Merrymakers continued on page 9.

Highlighting those who make an impact for the Care Management program, Homemaker Services

By Ron Petersen
The Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging (ENOA) lends a hand to those who need a little extra help around the house.

ENOA's Homemaker service is just one type of service the Care Management program can offer to those who qualify. Homemakers provide light housekeeping services for older individuals who are physically unable to perform tasks around their home.

About 60% of Care Management participants rely on Homemakers to maintain the cleanliness of their home, as they are unable to do so themselves, due to a number of physical impairments or health ailments.

"Several Care Management participants have commented to many of our Care Managers that they wouldn't be able to remain in their home without the help of the Care Management program and Homemaker services," Care Management Program Coordinator, Montanna Walling said. "Care Management participants also have commented what a benefit it is to have services coming into their home for socialization purposes as several participants are isolated and, or don't have any family or friends in the area."

To be eligible for the Care Management program, participants must be age 60 or older, live in Douglas, Sarpy, Dodge, Washington, or Cass counties, and need assistance with daily activities, such as personal



care or routine tasks. "The Care Management program has trained Care Managers who can assist older adults 60 and older, in finding services and community resources available to meet their needs," Walling said. "For those who are eligible and wish to remain in their independent setting of choice, but just need a little help doing so – light housekeeping, limited personal care assistance, an emergency response system, and/or home-delivered meals can be utilized."

The Care Management program currently has eight Personal Care/Bath Aid providers and 10 Homemaker providers accepting new participants and clients for services.

There are a total of 16 contracted Personal Care/Bath Aid providers and 20 contracted Homemaker providers ENOA works with in the Care Management Program. Despite the great assistance ENOA receives from their providers, the Care Management Program is looking for more assistance.

"Due to the ever-changing com-

petitive employment market, many of ENOA's contracted providers haven't been able to stay fully staffed to keep up with the growing number of participants eager to utilize these services," Walling said. "As the 'baby boomer' generation is coming of age, ENOA's Care Management program can anticipate numbers (hopefully) increasing, which also increases the need for reliable, contracted providers to be able to provide these much-needed services."

There are 104 current participants receiving Personal Care services and 373 receiving Homemaker services. Many participants stopped services for awhile due to COVID. Now based on the participant's comfort level, many participants in the Care Management program have allowed visitors and services back into their homes.

"Care Managers are asked to complete a set of 'pre-visit screening' questions to ensure the safety of participants," Walling said. "Care Managers can also wear masks during the entirety of the home visit if

requested by the participant as well as practice social distancing based on the participant's preference."

What a homemaker can do:

- Carry out trash
- Change bed linens/make bed
- Clean the bathroom
- Clean the bedroom
- Clean range
- Clean and defrost refrigerator
- Dust
- Grocery shopping
- Laundry
- Mopping floor with mop
- Prepare food
- Vacuum
- Wash dishes/load and unload dishwasher
- Wash mirrors

The Care Management program receives new referrals daily of possible participants needing assistance and ENOA tries to set up services as quickly as possible for those who are eligible, but there may be a delay due to provider availability.

"The ENOA Personal Care and Homemaker Programs provide the needed assistance to our clients so that they can remain living safely and independently in their own homes for as long as possible," Community Services Coordinator, Michaela Sherrets said. "It is truly a gift to be able to help our elders to 'age in place,' where they feel the most comfortable."

To learn more about the Care Management program and Homemaker services, give ENOA a call at 402-444-6444.

Is it COVID-19, flu, RSV or maybe strep throat?

By Kokou Kanley
If you or your loved one start experiencing symptoms this season, it could send your mind wandering in many directions. There is a higher level of anxiety, since the introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This 2022-2023 season is unlike any other, and it is essential to know which illness you have in order to take the appropriate precautions.

Influenza (Flu), COVID-19, RSV and strep are all contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are

caused by different microorganisms. COVID-19 is caused by an infection with a new coronavirus (called SARS-CoV-2), Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is caused as you would guess by the syncytial virus and flu is caused by an infection with influenza viruses. Strep is caused by the streptococcus bacterium.

All four illnesses have many symptoms in common including fever, cough and many others. Because some of the symptoms of these four diseases are similar, it may be hard to tell the dif-

ference between them based on symptoms alone, and testing may be needed to help confirm a diagnosis.

However, the key difference between them is that COVID-19 can lead to shortness of breath and loss or change in smell or taste, while those manifestations are often not seen with flu or strep throat. Additionally, strep throat is more common in children and often presents as a mild disease.

With that contrast between these illnesses, let's now talk about Point of care of Tests (POC). POC tests are convenient tests that can be administered to a sick individual to determine an illness.

The goal is instant availability of results in order to make immediate and informed decisions about patient care. They are really quick and can return results in as little as 10 to 15 minutes. They work similarly to a pregnancy test. POC are coated with antibodies, which are proteins that bind

to part of the virus or bacterium. There is also a control, which consists of antibodies already bound to a virus or bacterium, oftentimes indicated by a red line.

If a person tests positive, there would be 2 lines on the test, one for the control and the other for the result of the test. A negative test would only have one line, the control line.

If you or a loved one start showing symptoms this flu season, it is vital to figure out the cause in order to take the appropriate actions.

In such a case, you have one of three options.

The first option, which is the most expensive and less convenient, is to make an appointment to be seen at your doctor's office. This can take a couple of days, and a visit to the physician is not cheap. Besides the time lag, you could be spreading the disease to others. This option is not the most practical.

The second option, which is also expensive but more

convenient, is going to an urgent care clinic. There, you can be seen quickly, and get the appropriate treatment. It is also great for controlling the spread of the disease.

However, a trip to the urgent care clinic can easily cost \$200 to \$300, especially for someone who does not have insurance.

The third and final option, which is both cheap and convenient, is going online and making an appointment to take a POC test.

If you are positive for the flu or strep, you do not need to call your doctor to get a prescription.

In conclusion, this flu season promises to be a challenging one. However, there are many options available to help you and your loved ones navigate it.

For more information on seasonal illnesses and ideas on how to best deal with them, check out the CDC website.

(David Kohll of Kohll's RX)

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January is National Blood Donor Month

Did you know that every two seconds someone in the United States needs blood? Or that winter months make it extremely difficult to collect the necessary amount of blood and platelets needed to supply hospitals?

This January, the American Red Cross celebrates National Blood Donor Month and recognizes the lifesaving contribution of blood and platelet donors.

National Blood Donor Month has been celebrated each January for more than 50 years and coincides with one of the most difficult times to maintain a sufficient blood supply for patients.

When it comes to blood and platelet donations, the winter season is often filled with hurdles as blood drives compete with things such as seasonal illnesses and inclement weather. A donation shortfall over the winter holidays has prompted the American Red Cross to issue an emergency call for blood and for platelet donors to donate blood, to prevent a blood shortage from continuing throughout winter and affecting patient care.

The Red Cross collected more than 27,000 fewer blood and platelet donations the weeks of Christmas and New Year’s than needed to sustain a sufficient blood supply, as busy holiday schedules kept many donors away.

During this critical time of year, the Red Cross depends on donors to continue to supply these resources to make sure that blood products are available at about 2,500 hospitals nationwide.

Thanks to the generosity of volunteer blood donors, the American Red Cross helps patients receive the blood and platelets needed to battle illness and injury.

According to the Red Cross, in 2018 nearly 2.7 million people in the U.S. volunteer to donate blood and platelets every year.

Blood and platelets are available for distribution to hospitals through the Red Cross 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Blood transfusions are given to patients in all kinds of circumstances, including serious injuries, surgeries, childbirth, anemia, blood disorders, cancer treatments and many others.



This consistent demand makes National Blood Donor Month an integral piece of the puzzle. Each day the Red Cross must collect 13,000 pints of blood from across the country to meet the needs of patients. This makes a blood and platelet shortage during the colder months a crucial matter for the Red Cross and the hospitals they serve.

Blood is a perishable product that can only come from generous volunteers.

A blood donation takes about an hour from start to finish, but the actual donation itself only takes between eight to 10 minutes.

By spending an hour giving blood, donors can aid their community and help save lives. Each blood and platelet donation can save the lives of as many as three people, so this January be a hero in your community and find the closest blood drive or blood donation center in your area.

Simply download the American Red Cross Blood Donor App, visit RedCross-Blood.org or call 1-800-RED CROSS (1-800-733-2767) to make an appointment or for more information. All blood types are needed to ensure a reliable supply for patients. A blood donor card or driver’s license or two other forms of identification are required at check-in.

Individuals who are 17 years of age in most states (16 with parental consent where allowed by state law), weigh at least 110 pounds and are in generally good health may be eligible to donate blood. High school students and other donors 18 years of age and younger also must meet certain height and weight requirements.

Blood donors can save time at their next donation by using RapidPass to complete their pre-donation reading and health history questionnaire online, on the day of their donation, prior to arriving at the blood drive.

To get started and learn more, visit red-crossblood.org/RapidPass and follow the instructions on the site.

Bringing awareness to healthcare reimbursement phishing scams

When you request a reimbursement from your healthcare provider, it may be completed through a third-party payment processor.

These payment processors often offer direct deposit payments so you can get reimbursed as soon as possible. Unfortunately, cybercriminals can use social engineering to try to steal your reimbursement. In a recent scam, cybercriminals are sending phishing emails that appear to be related to an active reimbursement request.

The emails ask you to verify your request number and other identifying information to finish processing your request.

If you provide this information, cybercriminals can use it to gain access to your account by verifying your identity.

Then, they can update your direct deposit information to redirect payments to their own bank accounts.

Follow these tips to stay safe from healthcare claim scams:

- Never click a link in an

email that you aren’t expecting. Contact the payment processor directly by using a known phone number or email address.

- Watch out for notifications that your account information, such as direct deposit information, was changed.

- Always enable multi-factor authentication (MFA) on your accounts when available. MFA adds a layer of security by requiring that you provide additional verification to log in to your account.

Make a donation to help support the

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New Horizons

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Fremont Friendship Center

You’re invited to visit the Fremont Friendship Center, 1730 W. 16th St. (Christensen Field). The facility is open Monday through Thursday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Friday from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. A meal is served weekdays @ 11:30 a.m. Reservations, which are due by noon the business day prior to the meal the participant wishes to enjoy, can be made by calling 402-727-2815. A \$4.25 contribution is suggested for the meal.

- This month’s activities will include:
- **January 2:** Center is closed
 - **January 4:** Music with John Worsham @ 10:30 a.m.
 - **January 5:** Blood Pressure Clinic with Nye @ 9:30 a.m.
 - **January 11:** Music with Billy Troy @ 10 a.m.
 - **January 12:** Long Term Care Medicaid Planning Presentation by Elder Law of Omaha @ 9:45 a.m.
 - **January 16:** Center is closed- Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - **January 18:** Music with Tim Javorsky @ 10:30 a.m.
 - **January 25:** Music with Kim Eames @ 10:30 a.m.
 - **January 26:** Presentation on the center @ 10 a.m.
 - **January 27:** Movie, “Mrs. Wetherby’s Treasure” @ 10:30 a.m.
- Craft Class is every Tuesday from 1:30-2:30 p.m.
Tai Chi offered every Tuesday and Friday from 9:15-10 a.m.
For meal reservations and more information, please call Laurie at 402-727-2815.

Respite Across the Lifespan

Life can bring on stress for many of us. Finding ways to relieve stress are important to our overall health and well-being. Caregivers are not immune to this stress. Please contact Respite Across the Lifespan at edben-nett@unmc.edu or 402-559-5732 to find out more about respite services and to locate resources in your area.

Want to stay home, but can’t do it alone?

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*Central time zone



Being told to downsize?

With Thanksgiving and Christmas come and gone, have your friends or family members that visited you



Soucek

starting to ask questions like... how are you feeling or how’s your health, are you getting around the house ok, or are there tasks around the house that you need help with?

It’s often others who see changes in a person’s mobility and physical or mental health condition. And, if they are a good friend or family member, they will say and do something to help, if they think help is needed (at least that’s my opinion).

It’s understandable for a person to want to remain in their house as long as possible. And there are some great products and services to help you stay in your house safely, including walk in tubs, stairlifts, handyman services, medical alert systems, as well as in home care services.

I also understand that there are certain challenges that might signal that a house is no longer suitable for the mobility, budget, and convenience of a homeowner.

Downsizing may be a

good solution for these situations.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

If you have been thinking about a move to a smaller home, apartment community, or other senior living community, there are a few questions you should ask...

First, what are the main needs that you have on a daily basis? Does the size and layout of your house allow you to do the daily tasks you need to do without the danger of falling or hurting yourself?

Think of primary items like stairs and steps, doorways, bathroom convenience, and yard or garden size. Will these items be a problem in the near term or years to come?

Are there chores that could become more difficult in the future than they were in the past, and will you need helpers to assist with those items when needed?

Are you able to take care of personal health items or will you need help with these now or in the near future?

Another consideration is the distance to family, friends, and community.

BENEFITS OF DOWNSIZING

A positive outcome of downsizing is having a living arrangement that has the benefit of community, a better support system, and

even better, living closer to family.

Several years ago, my company purchased a house from a gentleman that was 92 years old. He was still living independently and doing well, but his son didn’t want him living on his own. After moving to an independent living community, I was told that he really changed... for the better. He made friends, was able to get involved in activities, and in general had a better life!

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Just know that whether you want to stay in your house or look into downsizing options, there are resources available to you.

Services that can assist with packing and moving, finding the right senior living community, and provide the right real estate solutions.

And also, services to help you stay in your house, to give your friends and family the peace of mind that you are safe and secure.

Ben Soucek is an author of the book Home Downsizing Secrets, and the owner and founder of Home Downsizing Solutions, a company that specializes in helping home owners transition from their current house to a new home, apartment, or other senior living community for more than 25 years.

UNMC study conducted to measure healthy benefits of Girls Inc. programs

Rebecca Slotkowski, a student in the MD/PhD program at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), received National Institutes of Health funding for a two-year study that will measure the physical and cardiovascular health impact that Girls Inc. has on its young participants.

“The beauty of this project is that it grew from the inspiration of leaders and stakeholders at the organization,” Slotkowski said.

A national organization serving young women ages 5-18, with locations in both North and South Omaha, Girls Inc. equips participants with the life skills they need to lead healthy lives.

Evidence-based programs at the non-profit teach participants how to cook nutritious meals using foods grown in Girls Inc.’s in-house garden.

The girls and young women also have access to mental health support through mediation, on-site counselors, exercise areas and quiet spaces.

Roberta Wilhelm, Girls Inc. executive director, said the relationship between Girls Inc. and UNMC is built on trust and transparency.

“It’s one thing to believe that Girls Inc.

programs help girls live better lives, but it’s another thing to have those beliefs backed up by research,” Wilhelm said. “We are grateful that UNMC is partnering with us to measure the impact of the girls’ experiences at Girls Inc.”

Over two years, Slotkowski will track metrics – such as cortisol levels, blood vessel conditions and survey responses – to assess the health level of the girls in the study.

Ann Anderson Berry, MD, PhD, chief, division of neonatology, UNMC Department of Pediatrics, executive director of the Child Health Research Institute, Girls Inc. board member and Slotkowski’s mentor, assigned her the study because of her passion for the research and population.

“Rebecca is an incredibly talented writer and researcher,” Dr. Anderson Berry said.

Andrea Jones, MD, associate professor in the UNMC Department of Family Medicine and Girls Inc. director of the North Omaha health clinic center, said the study is built on relationships and collaboration.

“Participants trust that this research will benefit them or those they care about,” she said. “The research team appreciates the values and priorities of the community and that is reflected in the study’s goals.”

Nutrition Services Division Director, Susan Davern retires after 28 years



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Susan Davern, Nutrition Services Division Director, will retire on January 6, after 28 years of outstanding and commendable service at the Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging.

Davern began her career with ENOA on January 6, 1995, as the Dietician Administrative Coordinator in the Nutrition Services Program. Davern began as the Nutrition Services Division Director in 2010. Davern has overseen the provision of up to 1,600 meals served daily at up to 36 nutrition sites, in addition to the recreation, social and health education activities.

Davern has increased community awareness of the benefits of senior nutrition sites, working in partnership with other community agencies, organizations and businesses to provide access to an array of opportunities for older adults to stay safe, active and healthy.

Intercultural Senior Center

You're invited to visit the Intercultural Senior Center (ISC), 5545 Center St.

The facility – open weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. – offers programs and activities from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Participants must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 to attend the ISC. Men and women are asked to wear a mask and bring their vaccination card with them when visiting the center.

During the month of January the Intercultural Senior Center will host daily exercise from 9:15–9:40 a.m. and 9:50–10:15 a.m.

Parkinson Nebraska will be held on January 12th, January 19th and January 26th.

The center will be closed with no programs or activities from on January 2nd for New Year Observance Day, January 16th for Martin Luther King Jr. Day and January 27th.

The ISC offers a light breakfast, lunch, fitness classes, programs, and activities. Technology classes are held Tuesdays and Wednesdays @ 10:20 a.m. and Wednesdays and Fridays @ 12:30 p.m.

Lunch reservations are due by 9 a.m. A voluntary contribution is suggested for the meal. Please call 402-444-6529 for reservations.

Monthly food pantries are available for men and women ages 50 and older.

ISC's SAVE bus can bring case management services to your doorstep.

For more information, please call 402-444-6529.

Call Marsha at 402-444-6536

ENOA is recruiting volunteers to become Ombudsman Advocates

The Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging is looking for men and women ages 21 and older to join its Long-term Care Ombudsman Program, which is co-sponsored by the Nebraska State Ombudsman Program.

ENOA's Ombudsman advocates visit residents in local long-term care facilities and assisted living communities to protect the residents' rights, well-being, and quality of life.

Long-term Care Ombudsmen advocates must complete 24 hours of initial classroom training and 18 hours of additional training every two years.

During the training, the volunteers learn about residents' rights, aging issues, Medicare, Medicaid, communication skills, how to investigate residents' complaints, the importance of confidentiality, and federal and state rules, regulations, and laws regarding Nebraska's long-term care facilities and assisted living communities.

Before being assigned to a long-term care facility or an assisted living community, new volunteers will make four visits to a site with an experienced Ombudsman Advocate to learn more about what the program entails. After a three-month probationary period, the new volunteers are certified as Ombudsman Advocates.

Certified Ombudsman Advocates will be assigned to a long-term care facility or an assisted living community where they'll visit for two hours a week to meet with administrators, residents, and the residents' family members to address concerns.

For more information about ENOA's Long-term Care Ombudsman Program, please call Marsha Peters at 402-444-6536.

We need your support!

I would like to become a partner with the Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging, and help fulfill your mission with older adults.

ENOA

- ☐ \$30 = 7 meals or 1.5 hours of in-home homemaker services or 1 bath aide service for frail older adults.
- ☐ \$75 = 17 meals or 3.66 hours of in-home homemaker services or 3 bath aide services for frail older adults.
- ☐ \$150 = 35 meals or 7.3 hours of in-home homemaker services or 7 bath aide services for frail older adults.
- ☐ \$300 = 70 meals or 14.63 hours of in-home homemaker services or 14 bath aide services for frail older adults.
- ☐ Other amount (please designate) _____
- ☐ Please contact me. I would like to learn more about how to include the Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging in my estate planning.

Traditional funding sources are making it more difficult for ENOA to fulfill its mission. Partnership opportunities are available to businesses and individuals wanting to help us. These opportunities include volunteering, memorials, honorariums, gift annuities, and other contributions.

These gifts are tax exempt.

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Please see the ad on page 3

New Horizons Club gains new members

\$100

In memory of Doris Bowers,
from Karolyn Duponcheel

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Blanche Hopp
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Tillie Van Vleet
Kathleen Koons

Corrigan Senior Center

You're invited to visit the Corrigan Senior Center, 3819 X St. this month for a variety of activities.

The Corrigan Senior Center is open weekdays from 8 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. Lunch is served at noon. A \$4.25 donation is suggested for the meal. Reservations can be made by calling 402-731-7210.

December activities include:

- **January 20:** AARP Presentation @ 11 a.m.
- **January 26:** The Merrymakers @ 11 a.m.

Call 402-731-7210 for more information.

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New year, new beginning

By Nancy Hemesath

Each new year brings the opportunity for a new beginning, or so it seems. In reality, 2023 is the next step on a continuum, an expansion of all that has gone before in our lives.

If we want our future to be better than our past, we need to do a frank assessment of what has gone before. We can hardly expect a brighter future if we are not truthful about the things that have held us back in the past. What drags us down? In what ways have we been complicit in our own difficulties and challenges?

Recently I heard an interview with author Jerry Colonna. He makes the point that we are the culmination of all heritage and life experiences that imprint us, whether we remember or not. We can easily blame what has happened to us as the source of any current problems in our lives.

Colonna makes the point though that, "We are complicit, though not responsible, for the conditions of our lives we do not like."

In other words, while we may have been the recipients of injustice, it is unlikely that any problem has only a single source. We have probably participated in our own undoing in some way.

I can think of three ways that we might be complicit.

First, we might have been a participant in some difficulty we have endured.

For example, we may have witnessed the bullying of another person and joined in (unhappily) lest the bully turn on us. Or we may have unwittingly benefitted from white privilege, allowing others to lose out. Seldom is evil the result of one person's action but rather the

fester. For example, is there anyone in your life you have not forgiven? If so, this anger or bitterness will continue to rob you of new life. Are there things in your life you regret and blame yourself for doing—or not doing? Isn't it time to let yourself off the hook? Are

Conscious Aging

By Nancy Hemesath

participation of many.

A second form of complicity is passivity. I see an injustice but do not raise my voice. I once was the victim of an unjust process and when asked by my coach how I might have contributed to the situation, I got angry! I was the victim! Then I realized my complicity. I had been passive, not speaking up for myself. How many times have I seen wrong perpetrated by another and failed to use my voice to object. (Excuse me while I call my congressman).

I see a third way we may be complicit in the wrongs we have experienced. We keep them alive by carrying them as baggage within us in the form of guilt, regrets, and unforgiveness.

Old hurts can be healed, and hopefully many of them have been. However, we know we need more healing when old hurts still

there old regrets (woulda, coulda, shoulda)? We all have these but we are also capable of letting them go by being gentle with ourselves.

What if we would take the opportunity of 2023 to do something positive to directly counteract the old complicities? Maybe I make it a practice of speaking kindly about others who have been unkind to me? Maybe I use my voice to counter racist comments? Maybe I donate to a cause that fights injustice or poverty I have endured? We each can make our own list.

Whatever we do will become part of us as we move into our future.

(Hemesath is the owner of Encore Coaching. She is dedicated to supporting people in their Third Chapter of Life and is available for presentations. Contact her at nanhemesath@gmail.com.)

NCOA: How senior centers are bringing back more older adults

The National Council of Aging (NCOA), has ideas as to how older adults can find comfort during the COVID pandemic.

Senior centers are local, trusted community gathering spaces, providing access to information and opportunities for healthy aging and support in a highly social setting. Whether it is a place to share a meal, take a fitness class, learn a skill, exercise creativity, enroll in benefits, or simply to hang out with friends, senior centers are a second home to many older adults.

That all changed in March 2020 when senior centers closed their doors to in-person activity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The global message to older adults was to stay home and stay safe. That messaging was effective. In those early, dark days, senior centers responded with outreach, making thousands of phone calls, and focusing on basic needs—food and safety. The working assumption was that this would be a short-term situation, a few weeks at best. As public health guidance changed, and especially with the availability

of vaccines, senior centers began a gradual shift back to in-person activity.

Senior centers have adapted how they operate and have implemented mitigation strategies. Here are two strategies and challenges senior center professionals discussed.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR SENIOR CENTER SPACE

• Think about your space. Social distancing is an effective mitigation strategy and increases comfort levels. Move programs into larger spaces that can allow for distancing.

FOOD IS A KEY WAY FOR SENIOR CENTERS TO REACH OLDER ADULTS

• Events, and especially those with great food, draw people in. Successful events have included lunches with themes and high-quality food, farm to table dinners, bringing in professional chefs, bingo with sponsors and higher value prizes, food trucks, and meals accompanied by professional entertainment.

Benefits of physical activity

By Shelbi Cotton

Do you often find yourself having little to no energy to complete day to day tasks? Do you ever experience difficulty doing simple, everyday movements? Physical activity can improve your energy levels, everyday movements, and benefit you in a variety of ways. Whereas, having a sedentary lifestyle could be more harmful than one might think. The National Institute of Aging found that having a dormant lifestyle can lead to more trips to the doctor’s office, hospitalizations, and possibly more medications usage.

Being moderately active for at least 150 minutes a week can: improve mental health and energy, improve day to day movements and balance, decrease your risk for other diseases, enabling you to stay at your ideal weight, and sleeping better at night. Just 10 minutes of activity a day could help prevent an estimated 110,000 deaths per year in adults.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that being physically active can benefit your mental health almost immediately. Moderate physical activity decreases stress, anxiety, and depression, and can enhance brain function, such as

thinking. Physical activity also encourages a better night of sleep.

Physical Activity can help keep you at a healthy weight and increases your balance to help prevent falls. Adults gain weight when they are eating and drinking more calories than the calories being burned. The calories that are needed to be burned or maintained vary from person to person. Moving and being physically active will help strengthen your bones and muscles, which can help prevent injuries from falls.

Per CDC, moderate physical activity can also decrease the likelihood of certain diseases such as: heart disease, Type 2 Diabetes, and some cancers.

- Two of the leading causes of death are heart disease and strokes. Being active helps improve circulation and reduces cholesterol levels, which will decrease the chance of getting those.

- Being physically active helps reduce your blood sugar and encourages insulin to work more efficiently. If you have already been diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes, being active can help your body properly regulate blood sugars and insulin.

- There are several cancers that physical activity will help you

decrease the chance of getting: bladder, breast, colon, uterine, esophageal, kidney, lung, and stomach. If you are a survivor of cancer, physical activity will help your body regain strength.

Here are some ways that you can increase your physical activity in your day-to-day schedule:

- Make your everyday routine more active, such as taking the stairs, parking further from the building you are going to, or biking instead of driving.

- Joining an active class or going on outdoor adventures with someone can help you enjoy moving more.

- Tracking your progress and reaching goals can help you stay motivated.

- Taking more steps every day can help prevent premature death. Adults younger than 60 years old should take about 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day, and adults 60 years old or older should take 6,000 to 8,000 per day.

- Exercise should be fun for you. Put on your favorite show or favorite type of music and start moving.

- Any movement will help benefit your overall health, and substituting movements, such as dancing instead of running, is a great way to stay active by doing activities you enjoy.

UNMC Women’s research center seeks community participation

The Nebraska Center for Women’s Health Research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center is inviting researchers, scientists and other health professionals – as well as the public – to access the center’s program of educational opportunities by becoming members of the center at no cost.

“The invitation is open to everyone. You don’t have to be a physician or health care provider,” said John Davis, PhD, director of the center.

The creation of the center was approved by the Nebraska Board of Regents in April. It will facilitate research and training opportunities for anyone interested in women’s health issues, including not only researchers, clinicians and others in the health professions but the general public as well.

“We hope that by sharing this information and getting people to participate, we can stir up more community awareness and interest,” Dr. Davis said.

The free membership will grant access to educational opportunities set to begin this fall, including speakers on areas of interest in women’s health research.

“Participation is key in the development of the center’s programs,” Dr. Davis said. “We hope to support new programs by

providing these educational opportunities, in addition to providing seed grants for collaborative research.”

The center will include faculty from the UNMC Colleges of Medicine, Allied Health Professions, Public Health, Pharmacy and Nursing. Faculty from the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, VA Medical Center, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and University of Nebraska at Omaha also will be involved.

The center’s initial research priorities include maternal fetal health, health disparities – in particular uterine fibroids – and reproductive aging. Additional research topics will be chosen based on the expertise and interest of the center’s members, including members of the public. There are many conditions that are unique to women’s health. However, Dr. Davis said, most research has been conducted using male subjects and as a result women’s research has historically been underfunded, a disparity the center will address.

“We’ll have a robust research program that addresses a variety of issues related to women’s health,” Dr. Davis said. “I hope that excitement and initiative spills over into the community.”

First United Methodist Church

First United Methodist Church has some excellent adult curriculums currently available to those around the Omaha, Fremont, Bellevue and Elkhorn areas.

The adult curriculums are free for any Christian group, which would like to study prayer, discipleship and beliefs.

Call First United Methodist Church at 402-556-6262 if you wish to receive for information about the list of the studies available.

Elder Access Line

Legal Aid of Nebraska operates a free telephone access line for Nebraskans ages 60 and older.

Information is offered to help the state’s older men and women with questions on topics like bankruptcy, home-stead exemptions, powers of attorney, Medicare, Medicaid, and Section 8 housing.

The number for the Elder Access Line is 402-827-5656 in Omaha and 1-800-527-7249 statewide.

This service is available to Nebraskans ages 60 and older regardless of income, race, or ethnicity.

The Legal Aid of Nebraska hours of operation are 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and 9 a.m. to noon on Friday.

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From languishing to flourishing: Emerging from social isolation of the COVID-19 era

By Andy Bradley
Contributing Writer

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced in March of 2021 that vaccinated people could resume pre-pandemic activities, not everyone opted to venture back out. The American Psychological Association reported this fall that nearly half of the vaccinated population harbored



Wengel hesitations about returning to life as they knew it. Seniors in particular grew accustomed to sheltering in place, and many have remained isolated nearly two years later.

This prolonged hibernation goes by various names, each signifying something a little different, including COVID Stress Syndrome, Cave Syndrome and Pandemic Agoraphobia.

But the reasons some people have not fully emerged from their self-imposed exile are many and varied, according to local and national authorities. Some have simply grown accustomed to comfortable, slow and quiet lives, and prefer it that way.

“Who doesn’t like getting cozy and staying safe,” said Dr. Steven Wengel, a geriatric psychiatrist with Nebraska Medicine. “Some people are natural introverts.”

Others remain hunkered down because they experience a post-COVID decline in motivation or interest in the things they previously enjoyed, which experts term “languishing.”

For some, aging bodies simply grew frailer and more fragile, making a return to pre-pandemic normalcy problematic.

Finally, a small but significant number developed a fear – sometimes irrational – of becoming infected or reinfected if venturing out in public.

Regardless of the reason, this social isolation is a real and ongoing phenomenon, according to Wengel, who also affiliates with the UNMC Home Instead Center for Healthy Aging.

“I’ve seen this in many of my own patients.”

Unfortunately, isolation, no matter the cause, can lead to other problems, including loneliness, depression and even serious health problems.

“Research has shown that loneliness is extremely common in older adults, and it has some startlingly serious health consequences,” said Wengel in an April 2020 podcast interview with Dr. Lorenzo Norris of George Washington University, “People can actually literally die of loneliness,” he added. “We are the most connected, yet disconnected, society we have ever seen.”

In an interview this month with New Horizons, Wengel also described the troubling yet common experience of “languishing,” a malady that mimics depression and can contribute to social isolation. Languishing is a numbing state of mind, an insidious form of mental paralysis. Its victims can’t seem to regain their previous vigor and enthusiasm for life. It’s usually accompanied by a sense of restlessness. The term, coined by Emory University sociologist Corey Keyes, can be illustrated as showing up for life but living without purpose and aim. He illustrated, for example, the saga of a 75-year-old man who may have previously attended the YMCA three times a week and volunteered at church. Then, unexpectedly, he becomes disinterested and reclusive during COVID-induced isolation. “All that activity has stopped and is on hold. He hasn’t reengaged.”

The phenomenon of languishing has resonated strongly with Dr. Wengel’s audiences during lectures and presentations to colleagues and others. Its opposite is “flourishing,” when people experience everyday life with energy and enthusiasm, and eagerly anticipate their routine socializations and activities

Languishing, on the other hand, can be a compelling reason why some older adults didn’t reemerge from their domiciles after the CDC issued the “all-clear” declaration for vaccinated individuals in 2021.

Wengel suggests a two-



COURTESY PHOTO

COVID-19 impacted the physical, social, mental as well as emotional well-being of older adults. Some older adults to this day still feel the impact COVID-19 has made in their every day life.

pronged approach for supporting those who are isolated – a slow but progressive re-introduction to socialization, and reconnecting with nature.

“Socialization is one of the basic forms of treatment,” he said. If not in-person, then virtually. Zoom and FaceTime are imperfect but important and valuable intermediate steps.

In addition, frequent walks around the block, to the neighborhood park or even to a local garden center can be emotionally and physically renewing. “I do recommend getting outside, even for a few minutes.” He said a recent study of 20,000 adults in England suggested that just 17 minutes a day spent in nature, or two hours a week, can be reinvigorating.

Regardless of the reentry approaches – socialization, communing with nature, or both – Wengel urges a slow and measured approach to returning to normalcy. “I’ve been recommending do a little something . . . don’t hold yourself to an impossible high standard.” For example, venture to the neighborhood senior center once, then twice a month, then weekly before attempting a daily return. “Set the bar lower and cut yourself some slack.” A restrained and unhurried reentry to former bustling lives of socialization, volunteerism and other pursuits doesn’t mean we have suddenly turned lazy or docile. “Don’t beat yourself up and stop judging yourself,” he said.

The numbers of older citizens who remain socially isolated following COVID is unknown. Anecdotally,

several managers of the Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging’s (ENOA) senior centers related stories of patrons who have not returned following COVID. They described a multitude of diverse reasons – a few fear-based, but most health related.

One 99-year-old person has not returned to the Ralston Senior Center because she remains unvaccinated. Due to doctors’ orders and complicated medical factors, “she has been homebound since COVID struck two and one-half years ago,” said Ralston senior center board president Ron Wilson. Others are also absent because they, too, are battling serious health issues. Still others are reluctant to return due to profound fears of COVID infection. Overall, attendance is down by 10% compared with pre-COVID numbers, Wilson said. “We set up just three tables for lunch now.”

The manager of the Fremont Friendship Senior Center reports that attendance has stabilized, although several former participants have not returned due to failing health.

“You worry about them being alone and isolated,” said center manager Laurie Harms. “A lot of people have moved into nursing homes and assisted living facilities,” and others have moved closer to family.

“Some were very nervous when we reopened,” Harms said. “It took a long time to return to normal.”

Harms said two factors have contributed to stable attendance in Fremont.

First, some workers opted to retire during COVID, channeling new members to the center. Second, several older women lost husbands during COVID, and have discovered the center as a place for support and comradery.

In Arlington, attendance is higher than pre-COVID days, with some notable exceptions. A former regular attendee now spends most of her days in the quiet solitude of her home, seen only by neighbors and friends when she saunters the two blocks to the bank or post office, said center manager Cheryl Abbott. She is deterred from returning to the center by mobility and balance issues, as well as her children’s cautions. But she likes seeing and waving to her neighbors during her brief walks.

“Little things mean a lot,” Abbott said.

Others who were regular attendees may now attend only for special occasions, like the Christmas party or to sub for card games.

A former regular attendee in Bellevue has not returned because she is the primary caregiver in her family. Out of an abundance of caution and concern, she doesn’t want to risk introducing outside germs and viruses.

In the aggregate, attendance levels at senior centers have returned to near pre-COVID levels, said Susan Davern, ENOA’s nutrition services division director, although some sites and individual patrons are not as active as before COVID.

“Everyone was very eager to get back to a more normal life,” Davern said. Centers reopened gradually, with all programs operational by June 2021.

So while some center attendees remain cautious, even fearful, the vast majority were eager to return to normalcy.

“Most of our participants were biting at the bit to return,” Davern said. “And although some continue to don face coverings, most ‘were ready to rip those suckers off.’”

Today, ENOA’s senior centers stand poised to help all its guests transition from the COVID-induced blahs of languishing to the post-COVID excitement of flourishing.

--Merrymakers continued from page 1.

Over the last 36 years, the Merrymakers have been dedicated to bringing memories, laughter and fun to the lives of residents in Nebraska and Iowa senior care communities.

The Merrymakers look for professional musicians to provide quality music and can be very choosy when determining who will be on the roster of performers.

“People know when they see Merrymakers that it will be a quality performance because we have the best musicians that we can find,” Lemke said. “All of our musicians are professional musicians because we run like a business. We do want to serve our seniors with the highest quality that we can find.”

They currently have 27 talented performers, which do more than just sing.

“All of our musicians are varied in their musical styles, so people get a different show every month,” Lemke. “We mix it up and decide who gets a different performer every month.”

The performers on the list for the Merrymakers include Bill Chrastil, Tim Clark, Dave Eames, Kim Eames, Johnny Fascianella, Mark Irvin, Tim Javorsky, Mary Link, Mike McCracken, Mark Sanford, Diana Sapp, Tom Strohmeyer, Joe Taylor, Ben Tomasello, Joyce Torchia, Louis Watkins, John Worsham, Bill Connet, Becky Livermore, Rob Lumbard, Pat Lydon, Julie Moss, Gene Zeimet and Grammy nominee, Billy Troy.

A few of the performers also play instruments during their performances including the saxophone, guitar and keyboard.

Kim Eames, 64, has been performing professionally for 50 years. Eames has played the guitar and been a vocalist for the Merrymakers for the last 18 years.

Eames said she loves to perform and sing in front of people for the Merrymakers.

“I love what I do, and I love seeing people smile,” she said. “It lifts my own spirits and when I see it happen, then I want to do it again.”

Eames who performs about 20 shows a month for the Merrymakers, plays a wide variety of music.

Eames said it’s a rewarding experience being able to perform for the Merrymakers, while having a fun time.

“I hear people say, ‘you’ve made my day,’ all the time, which is very rewarding,” Eames said. “I get to know so many people and it’s wonderful to hear their stories.”

Joe Taylor who is known to tell stories between songs, gives the audience the background of the song or singer, which helps bring a different aspect to his show. It’s one of his tactics he uses when he tries to get his audience engaged.

“Some shows are just an absolute riot — I test the audience at the beginning of the show to see if it could be a tough crowd,” Taylor said. “It depends on the age and facility, but I usually get good reception because I sing songs that they know.”

The 87-year-old usually gets to relate to his audience because of his age, which helps when playing music people are familiar with.

“It’s about the most rewarding job that an entertainer could have, which is to see the response



COURTESY PHOTOS
Joyce Torchia (top left) is one of the 27 performers the Merrymakers provide to nursing homes, assisted living centers, senior centers, veterans’ homes and hospice care around the state of Nebraska and in Des Moines, Iowa.

and the way a room lights up when you start to perform a song that they know,” Taylor said. “One song could bring back a thousand memories. They do call me ‘Mr. Memories.’ ”

The Merrymakers currently serves more than 50,000 seniors in 179 senior living communities across Nebraska and in Des Moines, Iowa every month.

Larry Cornelius, who is the recreation director for Ambassador Health of Omaha, said the Merrymakers have played a big part in bringing entertainment to Ambassador over the last 36 years.

“They provide high-quality performers, and they are the best acts that we can host,” he said.

The Merrymakers offers two fundraising events each year that give people the opportunity to have a blast, while also brightening the lives of local seniors. They host Annual Toast and Songs & Suds, which helps raise money for musicians to help make an impact in the senior community.

“The Merrymakers is a blessing — the budget for activity in nursing homes is not enough because they don’t have budgets for music, let alone professional music,” Lemke said. “The impact the donations have is great because we are a lean organization.”

The Merrymakers is also different than the rest of the country because the Merrymakers is the oldest and largest organization of its kind, when it comes to providing music to older adults. The impact is what makes Lemke’s job an enjoyable one.

“I love going to performances — clearly the impact is great, and it really makes my job so incredibly satisfying,” Lemke said. “Music is the most popular thing. If you can provide music, it’s something they look forward to and talk about



for days after.”
Being a part of Merrymakers and being able to perform in senior communities has also been a rewarding experience for performers, Taylor said.

“The songs still light them up and they remember all of the words. I’ve had people sit there that start singing songs and they haven’t said a word in months,” Taylor said. “I am blessed that I am able to do it. I enjoy what I do, and I’ll do it as long as I can.”

Merrymakers gathered responses and comments from directors regarding the quality of performers in its 2022 survey results:

- We do not have money to have performers, so this is a blessing to our residents.
- Many residents ask, “when are you coming back?”
- They make comments for days after the performance about how much they enjoyed it.
- Our residents really enjoy the time with Merrymaker performances. They look forward to them and talk about the performances long after. Some residents do not participate in a lot of activities, but when we have Merrymakers here, they all come out. They just really appreciate the time and effort.
- Everyone is so friendly and many even remember names of our residents. They look forward to having their music.
- Live music is the residents absolute favorite activity.
- Music brings people together. It is the last thing the memory care people lose, and I see them perk up at the concerts, which honestly makes me cry.

FCC updates rules to improve 911 reliability

The Federal Communications Commission in December adopted rules to promote public safety by ensuring that 911 call centers receive timely and useful notifications of network disruptions that affect 911 service.

These notifications will help 911 call centers main-

tain emergency services and inform the public when to use alternatives to call 911.

One of the ways the Commission oversees the integrity of 911 communications infrastructure is by requiring service providers to report network outages to both the Commission and 911 call centers.

At present, the Commission has different outage notification rules for providers that serve 911 call centers (covered 911 service providers) and the wireless, wireline, and VoIP providers that individuals use to call 911 (originating service providers). The Commission today improved the

framework for reporting network outages that potentially affect 911 service and harmonized requirements, including the means, timing, and frequency of providing notification. The updated rules will standardize the type of information conveyed in the notifications and ensure that it is clear

and actionable, regardless of where in the call processing network an outage occurs.

The updated rules also require service providers to maintain up-to-date contact information for the 911 call centers they serve.

For more information, visit the FCC website at [fcc.gov](https://www.fcc.gov).



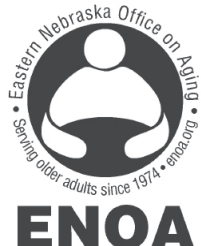
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Rod Mullen (left) and Tony Vargas pose for a picture as Mullen receives the 2022 History Nebraska Excellence in Teaching Award during the History Nebraska Foundation's Legislative Luncheon in March of 2022, at the Historic Kennard House.

Mullen reflects on his time of teaching, after 24 years

By Ron Petersen

Every morning before school at 4:30 a.m., the alarm goes off, reminding Rod Mullen to get out of bed. It's something he wasn't a fan of doing, but the reminder from legend Jim Brown's work ethic, pushed Mullen to get to work and teach the young men and women at Central High School.

But, in the spring of 2022 the choice of getting up at the crack of dawn was done because of one word: Retirement.

“I'm taking it a day at a time — I'm waking up every day and I'm still here,” Rod Mullen said. “It was a good time to leave when I still could.”

Mullen grew up in Omaha where he'd attend high school at Northwest.

After graduating in 1979, Mullen went to school at the University of Nebraska-Omaha where he earned his Bachelor of Science degree and Bachelor of Arts, Education degree.

In 1999, Mullen took his teaching skills to Central High School where he would go on to teach history classes to all four grade levels, for 24 years.

At Central, Mullen went on to teach world geography, ethnic studies, African American history, honors U.S. history, general history and modern world history, along with coaching the National African American History Challenge.

“There are so many

memories, it's hard to pick out one of my favorites,” Mullen said.

In 2018, Mullen had made an announcement to the class of 2022 that he was going to see their journey all the way through to the end and retire when they graduated.

He didn't know there was going to be a pandemic during the middle of it all and have to change his teaching model to teaching students over Zoom.

“It was tough at first because of technical difficulties,” Mullen said. “I did start to like it because it felt like a television show. I started to get a little kick out of it.”

While it was difficult at times to connect with his students, Mullen and the rest of the teachers at Central High School were able to manage and adjust to the constantly changing rules.

“It's hard to describe the feeling because we had to manage to make it through,” Mullen said. “It shows you that there is an individualism spirit that is in existence and when something goes down you see the toughness come into fruition. There were some good things that came out of the pandemic.”

In the last couple of years, Mullen was recognized with a few awards for his efforts in the classroom, including the 2022 History Nebraska Excellence in Teaching Award.

“Growing up in North Omaha, Mr. Mullen's

dedication to the teaching profession has inspired countless students to go into teaching and is an inspiration to future teachers of color. Last year, Mr. Mullen worked with others on the Omaha Public School Making Invisible Histories Visible program,” said in a statement from History Nebraska. “He joined rising 9th graders on a two-hour walk along North 24th Street, sharing memories of growing up in Omaha's predominantly African American neighborhood. He helped students understand what was a thriving area of North Omaha and contextualized its decline in the 1970s and 1980s. Fellow teachers comment on Mr. Mullen's passion for history, his reliability, and the relationships he creates with fellow teachers and students.”

Before retiring from Central, Mullen was recognized for his work ethic when he won the Central Teacher Award in 2019 and the Alice Buffet Outstanding Teacher Award in 2020.

“I know I'm not the smartest teacher, I'm not the most gifted teacher, but I pride myself in being the hardest working teacher,” Mullen said. “I made an effort to come to school every day and I never missed a day of work. You push yourself to answer the bell and that's what I did. Those awards were recognition of the hard work.”

Medicare and You: Steps to take if you use Medicare as healthcare coverage in 2023

Medicare and You is a new column provided by the Eastern Nebraska Office of Aging, New Horizons newspaper and Volunteers Assisting Seniors (VAS). Your columnist is a volunteer, certified Medicare counselor, with Volunteers Assisting Seniors.

When should I start the information gathering process? Where can I go to get some of my questions answered? If I have a unique situation, can Volunteers Assisting Seniors help me design a plan? I've heard about financial penalties for doing the wrong thing when it comes to Medicare—How do I avoid those? I receive lots of mail about Medicare—what should I keep and what can I throw away? I get emails, texts, and calls about Medicare. I am afraid of fraud but I don't want to miss out on something important—how should I handle all these communications? I'm still employed, do I have to enroll in Medicare? If I decide to start receiving my Social Security income before I turn 65, do I have to take Medicare?

In order to provide answers to these and many other questions, Volunteers Assisting Seniors recommends a two-step process.

First, attend a New to Medicare workshop. The workshop is free and provides an overview of the basics of Medicare. Second, after attending the workshop, make an appointment to see one of our counselors. This hour-long session will provide an opportunity for you to discuss details which may be unique to you.

Our objective is to partner with you and help you develop a plan of action complete with timeframes and directions on how to move forward and implement Medicare as your healthcare coverage.

While it is certainly true that Medicare is complex, our certified counselors work with you, and together, we use the complexity to your advantage. When we discuss your specific circumstances, the complexity allows us to formulate plans that best fit your individual needs.

Our experience has



demonstrated that people who avail themselves of both steps make fewer Medicare related mistakes, have a better understanding of the decisions they make regarding their Medicare coverage, and have more peace of mind transitioning to Medicare coverage.

WHEN SHOULD I BEGIN PLANNING FOR MY TRANSITION TO MEDICARE?

People contemplating using Medicare for healthcare coverage should begin the information gathering process at least 90 days before their proposed Medicare start date. If you are not sure of your start date, that's ok. We can help you arrive at the start date decision that is the best for you.

SAVE THE DATE

Volunteers Assisting Seniors hosts workshops in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. The workshops are interactive and questions are encouraged.

In Douglas County, workshops can be attended at two locations:

- New Cassel Retirement Center, 900 North 90th Street, Omaha. Time: 6:30-8 p.m. Dates: Wednesdays – Jan 18, Feb 15, Mar. 15, Apr 19, May 17, June 21.

- Metro Community College-Digital Express, 5300 North 30th, Bldg. 10, Omaha. Time: 6:30–8 p.m. Dates: Thursdays – Jan. 5, Mar 9, and May 4.

Sarpy County workshops

- Calvary Christian Church, North Building, 10100 Cedar Island Drive, Bellevue. Time: 6:30–8 p.m. Dates: Tuesdays – Jan. 10, Feb 14, Mar 14, Apr. 11, May 9, June TBD.

Call Volunteers Assisting Seniors 402-444-6617 for registration or see www.vas-nebraska.org for more information and workshop dates in the second half of 2023.

VOLUNTEERS ASSISTING SENIORS – WHO ARE WE?

For more than 40 years, Volunteers Assisting Seniors (VAS) has provided information, advocacy and access to community resources for Medicare eligible people in our community.

Volunteers Assisting Seniors is a nonprofit organization. We are the Eastern Nebraska representative for the Senior Health Information Assistance Program (SHIP).

SHIP is part of a national network, funded by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. All counselors are certified by SHIP and the Nebraska Department of Insurance.

We are not insurance agents and do not sell products. Our mission is to provide free, unbiased information about Medicare utilizing a network of 50 volunteers.

VAS was created in 1977 as part of a nationwide effort by the Junior League to provide legal guidance and information on insurance alternatives for senior community members, and to demonstrate that elderly residents of the community can be a resource for solving problems.

In 1980, VAS, originally known as Volunteers Intervening for Equity, was incorporated as a 501(c) (3) organization. In 2006, Volunteers Intervening for Equity changed its name to Volunteers Assisting Seniors and currently serves the senior population living in Douglas, Sarpy, Dodge, Washington and Cass counties.

Volunteers Assisting Seniors 402-444-6617.
1941 South 42nd Street, Suite 312 Omaha, Ne. 68105 (The old Center Mall on the corner of 42nd and Center) www.vas-nebraska.org.

King Crossword

- ACROSS**
1 Singer Lovett
5 "Ben-Hur" studio
8 Beanies
12 "Madam Secretary" actress
14 Opposite of "sans"
15 Very hungry
16 Gambling city
17 Coq au —
18 Painter Georges
20 Watched surreptitiously
23 Pot covers
24 Any time now
25 Stuffed Italian pasta
28 Boy king
29 Doctrine
30 NYPD alert
32 Gulches
34 Potter's medium
- 35 New newts
36 Tint
37 Import duty
40 JFK info
41 Portent
42 Enraptured
47 Theater award
48 Eternally
49 Variety
50 Still, in verse
51 Playwright O'Casey
- DOWN**
1 USPS delivery
2 Pro vote
3 Restroom, for short
4 Football team
5 Earth circler
6 Bearded beast
7 Written messages
8 Tenor Enrico
9 Say it's so
10 Elizabeth of "Jacob's Ladder"
- 11 Highlander
13 Oklahoma city
19 Redact
20 Retired jet
21 Serve coffee
22 Greek vowel
23 Highway divisions
25 Cheap way to live
26 Chorus syllables
27 Apple tablet
29 Squabble
31 "See ya!"
33 Like marble
34 Great divides
36 Commotion
37 Grabbed
38 Both (Pref.)
39 Check
40 Divisible by two
43 St. crosser
44 Weed whacker
45 Notable time
46 Lair

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15									16			
			17				18	19				
20	21	22				23						
24					25					26	27	
28				29						30		31
	32		33						34			
			35					36				
37	38	39					40					
41					42	43				44	45	46
47					48							
49					50				51			

This Month's Crossword Puzzle

	1	7		9				4
2					1	9		5
5			6				7	
		3			2			8
1				4			5	
	4		1			3		
		8	7				4	
	5	2			6		9	
9				8		2		3

Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each small 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.

This Month's Sudoku

La Vista Senior Center

You're invited to visit the La Vista Senior Center, located at 8116 Park View Blvd. The facility provides activity programs and meals Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Please call 402-331-3455 for general Community Center hours.

Meals are served weekdays at 11:30 a.m. Reservations are due by noon the business day prior to the date the participant wishes to attend and can be made by calling 402-331-3455. A \$4.25 contribution is suggested for the meal if you are age 60 and older. If you are under age 60, then the meal cost is \$11.

In addition to meals being served daily, the La Vista Senior Center offers a variety of activities such as: bingo, outings, cooking classes, computer classes, movies with popcorn, crafts, a variety of card games, quilting, tai chi, exercise classes, musical entertainment and various parties.

Please visit our website at cityoflavista.org/seniors for updated information or call 402-331-3455.

Survey: Unemployed older adults face discrimination

Unemployed adults react to their situation in different ways based on length of time out of work, according to a new AARP survey. But one factor affects nearly all unemployed older workers: Age discrimination.

The survey revealed that workers conduct their job search in different ways depending on how long they have been unemployed. For instance, 64% of those out of work for more than six months say they waited at least three weeks after

becoming unemployed to look for work, compared to just 37% of those out of work less than six months. The top reasons for holding off on looking: concerns about working during the pandemic and few job opportunities due to COVID-19.

Among short-term unemployed adults, 28% began job searches before becoming unemployed, and 37% started within one to two weeks.

More than four in 10

respondents indicate the pandemic was a contributing factor in their most recent period of unemployment.

Older job seekers face their own set of barriers. About 40% age 45-plus and 62% of those age 55-plus report experiencing age discrimination in their search. Long-term unemployed adults — those out of work for more than six months — are significantly more likely than short-term unemployed adults to face skill-based and age-based barriers.

The survey found that short-term unemployed individuals are more apt to contact employers directly and tap into their personal networks of family and friends than those on the job market for more than six months. Both groups indicate getting some training while unemployed, but their purposes differ somewhat. Short-term unemployed adults tend to use training to sharpen skills they already have, while long-term unemployed adults use training more to remain competitive in the job market or move into a new career.

More than half of unemployed older adults participated in training or education programs to upgrade their skills; however, just 53% of those short-term unemployed and 34% of those long-term unemployed say the training helped them find a job.

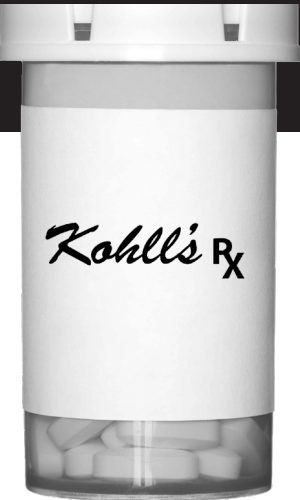
As for the COVID-19 factor, 66% of those unemployed during the pandemic found work, 26% remain unemployed, and 8% chose to retire. Most of those who gained employment landed in positions that were on par with their previous jobs.

One-fourth of those who retired wish they had prepared better for unemployment. Most regret not saving more money, 41% wish they'd gone back to school, and 30% regret not keeping their skills up to date.

Most unemployed job seekers do not second guess their job search behaviors. Those who do have regrets say that next time they would be more aggressive in their job search or look for a job in a different occupation.

(AARP provided this information).

GRAND OPENING KOHLL'S Rx LABORATORY



Skip your physician's office and get the tests and medications you need in just one quick stop.

Our Laboratory Technicians can test for UTI's, strep throat, Covid-19, flu, and RSV.

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Kohll's Rx
www.KohllsRx.com

12741 Q Street

Aging, living comfortably at home in the near future

By BevVan Phillips

Planning ahead made a quick and successful return home after my accident possible. It was possible to achieve a smooth transition from rehabilitation to home and to use my home well during recovery because I identified the best location for wheelchair or walker accessibility, which included a maneuvering space in prior remodeling. Many people have a goal of being



Phillips

Unfortunately, most simply hope things will work out. They may not realize they can and should act early that will help them later.

As an Occupational Therapist specializing in Home Modifications for over forty years, most of my career was spent helping people design modifications well after they experienced an accident or disabling medical condition. The worst time to think about remodeling, or to get involved with construction or product research is when a person is trying to get home from the hospital or trying to cope with life changes or pain.

I found it's sad that people had to endure the stress of finding the right equipment and planning remodeling, while in the middle of a medical crisis. It was horrible to find people who had suffered physically or endured isolation because they didn't know a piece of equipment, or a simple modification was available. It was difficult to change the pattern of reacting to disaster and to help people proactively identify ways to accomplish their goal by aging well in their own homes. I could tell it was hard for people to think about accessibility or equipment until they desperately needed something.

Recently the growing acceptance of the concept of aging in place made it easier to talk to people about modifications and equipment that they might need in the future.

However, sharing stories

about other people's successes with equipment or home modifications large and small has always been one of the best ways I found to help people see the need for and to understand how to really plan for the unforeseen future.

I can share a story of success now because I took my own advice to have realistic ideas about what to do if someone in the family needed a wheelchair or walker in the future and to build in useable spaces whenever we remodeled.

My husband and I were in a severe car accident in 2022. I still required a wheelchair at the time of discharge from Rehabilitation. Decisions we made starting over 10 years ago when we were both very healthy helped us through this crisis.

When we first bought the house, we remodeled the bathrooms. We didn't make them fully wheelchair accessible, but we widened the doors to 32 inches and installed very attractive grab bars in the tub shower.

When the kitchen was remodeled later, we discussed where we would locate a ramp or vertical platform lift if we ever needed one. We recorded information about the doorway width, the rise which is the total height, and the room where we had to place a ramp. The new kitchen included a low microwave, pull out cabinet shelving, easy to reach outlets and plenty of room to maneuver both within the kitchen and near the door we selected for potential accessibility.

When it was clear I would be going home in a wheelchair, it took only about an hour of phone calls to get the access modification process started. I was able to focus more on my work in therapy than fret about what to expect at home.

I rented an aluminum ramp with handrails because my need was less than six months. It was installed before I made that first trip home.

I borrowed two floor-to-ceiling grab bars from a state loan closet and purchased another from a local medical equipment company to help with moving on and off of the toilet and in and out of bed.

The floor-to-ceiling poles and transfer bench worked with what I already had in the bathroom.

The floor-to-ceiling poles press between a solid floor and ceiling joists. They can be pushed and pulled on and don't budge but can be removed without damage to the floor or ceiling when they are no longer needed.

I chose a tub transfer bench that had a seat that would pivot and slide to make up for my inability to use one arm and to fit the space I had to maneuver. I purchased the transfer bench online from a large supplier.

I had wonderful medical and rehabilitation services, but there was no comparison to how satisfying it was to live in my own space again even though I had to do things differently and use equipment.

I was able to do most of what I needed to take care of myself within a day. I could also quickly begin to do the things that made me feel like myself.

Within a week of getting home I was able to triumphantly make cookies because I could move around the kitchen and had plenty of space to work one handed.

Accidents and medical conditions happen, and some might say they are part of life. Home modifications and the right equipment can make it possible for people to achieve the goal of living as well as possible in their homes.

Preparing ahead with contingency plans and anticipating future abilities whenever you remodel is the best way. Even if you make no changes ahead of time, it is never too late to learn about what is available to make life at home easier and safer.

You can search the internet and catalogs, but a great way to learn is to listen to other people's success stories.

If you have a success story to share or want additional information about specific products mentioned in this article, feel free to reach BevVan Phillips at bphillipsotr@gmail.com.

BevVan Phillips is an Occupational Therapist with over 35 years experience helping people with home modifications and assistive technology.

Flaherty Senior Consulting

Caring for a loved one is difficult, and the challenges are amplified during a pandemic. Join Flaherty Senior Consulting for a series of Solutions Group gatherings that will address the questions and challenges caregivers face.

Solutions Groups provide opportunities for caregivers to learn how to deal with various issues, obtain skills and knowledge, engage in discussions, and interact with others in similar circumstances.

Upcoming meeting dates and locations are:

• **Jan. 10, March 14, May 9, July 11, Sept. 12, Nov. 14**
St. Vincent de Paul Church
14330 Eagle Run Dr.

• **Feb. 15, April 19, June 21, Aug. 16, Oct. 18, Dec. 13**
St. Timothy Lutheran Church
93rd and Dodge streets

• **Feb. 2, April 6, June 1, Aug. 3, Oct. 5, Dec. 7**
The Servite Center of Compassion
72nd St. and Ames Cr.

• **Jan. 28, March 25, May 20, July 22, Sept. 23, Nov. 18**
Faith Westwood
United Methodist Church
4814 Oaks Ln.

The Solutions Groups are facilitated by Nancy Flaherty, MS, CDP, president of Flaherty Senior Consulting. She has extensive experience working with family caregivers and caregiver groups.

Registration is required to attend each gathering. Masks are mandatory and social distancing will be observed.

Visit flahertyconsulting.net or call 402-312-9324 for more information.

Flaherty also provides private consultations with family caregivers to help them develop individual plans for their loved ones.

For information on private consultations, Solutions Group meeting times, and/or to register to attend a Solutions Group, email Nancy at flahertyconsulting@cox.net or call/text her at 402-312-9324.

FREE SMOKE ALARMS

To request free smoke alarms:

Call 211

Or visit
redcross.org/smokealarmNE
redcross.org/smokealarmIA

SOUND THE ALARM
Save a Life
American Red Cross

To help reduce the number of home fire-related injuries and fatalities, the American Red cross, will be installing free smoke alarms to those who register.

FIRE FACTS

2 MINUTES
to get out
of your house

7 TIMES A DAY
someone dies
from a house fire

EVERY 40 MINUTES
a fire injury
is reported

PROTECT YOUR LOVED ONES.

INSTALL SMOKE ALARMS.

MAKE A FIRE ESCAPE PLAN.

January 2023 • New Horizons • Page 13

Volunteer Connect offers a variety of opportunities

Do you have some spare time, a skill to share, and wish to contribute to your community? Private and non-profit agencies are looking for your help.

Please contact Tia Schoenfeld with the Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging’s Volunteer Connect program at 402-444-6536, ext. 1045 for more information on the following volunteer opportunities:

- Men and women are needed to write greeting cards of encouragement for residents living in skilled care and assisted living facilities.
- The American Cancer Society wants volunteers to help provide food and to perform other duties at its Hope Lodge Nebraska.
- Volunteer quilters are needed to create Busy Lap Blankets for long-term care facility residents.
- The Creighton University Medical Center-Bergan Mercy Hospital wants volunteers to take a dessert cart to new moms

who recently gave birth and to help out in its mail room.

- The Catholic Charities/St. Martin dePorres Center is looking for volunteers for a variety of duties.
- The Siena Francis House needs volunteers to serve breakfast and lunch.



- Volunteer Connect wants men and women to participate in a focus group.
- Partnership 4 Kids (P4K) is looking for volunteers to serve as Goal Buddies (5th grade) and Group Mentors (6-12th grade).
- Volunteers are needed to knit/sew baby caps/clothing and prayer shawls.
- Boys Town is looking for volunteers to help out at its Visitors Center and Hall of History Museum.

Power of positivity

In a world full of negativity, it can be hard to have positive thoughts and feelings. But it has been researched that when you radiate positivity it tends to keep everyone around you positive as well. So, is there a way that we can tap into the power of positivity? It isn’t as hard as it seems as with just about anything you must practice.

Here are 4 simple, yet powerful ideas on how you can get started.

First, learn to substitute every negative thought with a positive one. Every time a negative thought comes to mind, gently replace it with a positive thought.

Think of it this way; if someone were to come up and write something you don’t like on a blackboard; you can get up and erase it and write something that is more to your liking.

Second, see the positive side of every situation, even when you are surrounded by pure negativity. This idea may seem hard to practice, but it is not impossible. There is a way to find positivity in everything by mentally holding on to something positive. This could be your family, friends, faith, or nature. If you see the good in it, it is positive to you.

Third, at least once a day, take a moment and think of five things you are grateful for.

This is a fantastic way to lighten your mood and give you some perspective of what is important in life and how many positive things surround you already.

Finally, change the mental images you allow to enter your mind.

How you see yourself and your surroundings make a huge difference to your thinking.

If you tend to dwell on dark, negative thoughts, consciously build and focus on positive, light, and colorful images, thoughts and situations in your mind a few times a day. Always remember you are (or will become) what you think you are.

For other great resources and services, contact the Nebraska Safety Council at 402-483-2511 or go online to www.nesafetycouncil.org.

Live Healthy

Prescription Discount Card

Live Healthy

RxBIN:
RxPCN:
ID:

RxGRP:
Issuer:

NACo

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

This is NOT insurance.

SPEND LESS

on your prescriptions

with the

FREE

Douglas County

Prescription Discount Card

FREE

enrollment for Douglas County residents of all ages who are without prescription drug coverage.

AVERAGE SAVINGS OF 20%!

- No age requirements.
- No income requirements.
- Unlimited use for the whole family.
- No claim forms to fill out and no annual fee to pay.

This program is offered in a joint effort of Douglas County and the National Association of Counties (NACo).



For more information call 1-877-321-2652 or visit nacorx.org

This plan is not insurance. Discounts are only available at participating pharmacies.

Ralston Senior Center

You’re invited to visit the Ralston Senior Center, 7301 Q St., Suite 100 this month for the following:

- **January 4:** Bingo @ 12:15 p.m.
- **January 11:** Board meeting @ 10 a.m.
- **January 12 & 26:** Bingo @ 1 p.m.
- **January 18 & 25:** Bingo @ 12:15 p.m.

Lunch is catered in on Wednesdays @ 11:30 a.m. A \$4.50 contribution is normally suggested for the meal. Reservations are due by noon on Tuesday. Play games and bingo after lunch. Contact Diane @ 402-885-8895 for reservations.

Obtain an annual Ralston Senior Center membership for \$10. A current membership is \$5 for the remaining calendar year.

Contact Ron Wilson @ 402-734-3421 for further information.

The center may be used on weekends for various activities such as weddings, memorial services, anniversaries, family reunions, birthdays, baby showers, wedding showers, etc. On days the Ralston Public Schools are closed due to the weather, the Ralston Senior Center will also be closed.

For more information, please call Darla @ 402-651-5009 or 402-331-1529.

Camelot Friendship Center

You’re invited to visit the Camelot Friendship Center, 9270 Cady Ave., for regular activities, which include chair yoga, card games, Tai Chi, chair volleyball, chair Zumba, cornhole, and bingo.

Lunch is served weekdays at 11:30 a.m. A \$4.25 contribution is requested.

Reservations are due a day in advance, can be made by calling 402-444-3091.

For more information, contact Barb at 402-444-3091 or barbara.white@cityofomaha.org.

Cardiovascular research study done by Vascular Research Lab/School of Health and Kinesiology

The Vascular Research Lab (VRL) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha is conducting two research projects and are currently recruiting volunteers. These studies include researching how uninterrupted and interrupted sedentary behaviors impact vascular function in healthy older adults and investigating how an antioxidant supplement can affect the vascular function in adults who have peripheral artery disease. The VRL also offers a Vascular Fitness Assessment package for individuals who are interested in learning about their vascular health and how they can make lifestyle changes. Volunteers are needed to participate in a study titled Cardiovascular and Autonomic Responses to Acute Exposure to Mild Hypercapnic Conditions. The Vascular Research Lab at the University of Nebraska at Omaha will be examining the effects of commercial airplane cabin atmosphere simulated in an environmental chamber on cardiovascular and autonomic nervous system function in healthy individuals. This study will require five lab visits (seven hours) in the Vascular Research Lab located in the H&K building on UNO's Dodge St. campus. You will be compensated for your time. If you are diagnosed with chronic kidney/renal disease, heart failure, neuromuscular disease, known cancer, pregnant or nursing women, severe coronary artery disease, severe congenital heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, rheumatic heart disease, deep vein thrombosis, pulmonary embolism, uncontrolled stage 1 or 2 hypertension, hypotension, smoking within the previous six months, uncontrolled dyslipidemia, use of beta blockers, type II diabetes mellitus or obesity then you are not eligible for this study. To learn more about the research projects, contact Michael F. Allen at 402-350-0625.

Millard Senior Center

You're invited to visit the Millard Senior Center at Montclair, 2304 S. 135th Ave., this month for the following:

- January 9: THEOS (To Help Each Other Socially) @ 12:30 p.m.
- January 10: Making sundresses and shorts to be sent to Haiti and to the Orphan Grain Train which serves all over the world @ 10 a.m.
- January 11: Board Meeting @ 9:30 a.m.
- January 12: Dominoes @ 12:30 p.m.
- January 23: Book Club, "The Magnificent Lives of Marjorie Post" @ 1 p.m.
- January 24: Craft project using styrafoam balls and sequence @ 9:30 a.m.
- January 25: Montclair students and Seniors are going to be participating in PAWS. The student's need a little extra help with English @ 10 a.m.
- January 27: Banana Splits to celebrate Summer in July @ 10 a.m.

Line dance Thursdays @ 9 a.m.
Chair volleyball Thursdays @ 10 a.m.
MahJongg Wednesdays @ 1 p.m.
For more information, please call 402-546-1270.

L	Y	L	E		M	G	M		C	A	P	S
T	E	A	L	E	O	N	I		A	V	E	C
R	A	V	E	N	O	U	S		R	E	N	O
		V	I	N		S	E	U	R	A	T	
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S	O	O	N		R	A	V	I	O	L	I	
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	R	A	V	I	N	E	S		C	L	A	Y
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O	B	I	E		E	V	E	R	M	O	R	E
K	I	N	D		E	E	N		S	E	A	N

This Month's Crossword Answers

3	1	7	2	9	5	6	8	4
2	8	6	4	7	1	9	3	5
5	9	4	6	3	8	1	7	2
7	6	3	9	5	2	4	1	8
1	2	9	8	4	3	7	5	6
8	4	5	1	6	7	3	2	9
6	3	8	7	2	9	5	4	1
4	5	2	3	1	6	8	9	7
9	7	1	5	8	4	2	6	3

This Month's Sudoku Answers

Stuffing the stockings



NEW HORIZONS PHOTOS
The Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging (ENOA) stuffed stockings and later delivered them to Golden Manor Assisted Living, on 3853 Decatur St. during the month of December.



CLASSIFIEDS Please call 402-444-4148 or 402-444-6654 to place your ad

I AM COLLECTING

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- HUD-subsidized rent
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Omaha, NE 68131
402-898-5880

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Papillion (402) 331-6882
Monarch@KimballMgmt.com



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Omaha, NE
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ENOA

--*Polk continued from page 1.*
of a Ku Klux Klan grand dragon who made threats against them. She feared for her life. Since that disturbing episode, she's become less visible and vocal, though she still has plenty to say about wrongdoing.

Coming Full Circle

She grew up identifying as African American – her Black father was a career military officer in the U.S. Navy – but she's Comanche on her mother's side. Her mother died in a car accident when Donna was a young child and her maternal grandmother, who was a shaman (healer), became a major influence.

“My grandmother was tall and regal with long, straight, beautiful hair. She had a serape on one wall and a velvet picture of Jesus at the Last Supper on the other wall.”

Polk said she feels a connection between the healing her grandmother did and “the idea that I can facilitate processes that help people feel better mentally and physically,” adding, “I do believe my grandmother is probably looking at what I'm doing and feeling some degree of pride.”

Polk, whose contributions to Nebraska were read into the Congressional record last year by Nebraska Rep. Don Bacon, only ended up here when her Air Force officer husband got stationed at a Nike-Hercules missile site in Louisville in 1964. Persons of color were not welcome in town, so the couple and their four sons lived in segregated North Omaha.

“Black City Hall” (the old Fair Deal Cafe) on North 24th Street is where she learned the ins-and-outs of African American life in Omaha.

She was nearly 40 when she pursued higher education, earning a bachelor's in university studies, a master's in counseling psychology and a doctorate in administration, instruction and curriculum from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In 1972 she was hired as the state's first affirmative action-equal employment opportunity officer through the Nebraska Department of Labor. But the position didn't vest her with any real power.

“Back when I had that position I went all around the state – I've been in all 93 counties – and while I could say you should do this and it'd be nice if you did that, there was nothing compelling employers to hire with diversity, equity, inclusion in mind. Now state government can say this is what you're going to do.”

She's proud of the diverse staff and board she's assembled at NUIHC.

“We have people representing different races and ethnic groups that work with us as a team, and that's what keeps me coming back. I want equality. I want everyone to know they will be selected for advancement based upon their skill set or their ability to be trained and not their gender or race. I want people to be valued no matter what their job is.”

Polk was the first woman presi-



COURTESY PHOTO

In September this year, Donna Polk (center) and the Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition held its annual Grand Opening & Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for the Eagle Heights Campus, which includes the Low Income Housing Apartments and the Service Building in South Omaha. These projects were an answer to a need in the community: Safe and affordable housing and a place for the community to come together.

dent of the Lincoln Lancaster Board of Health. “I learned a lot about public health doing that.” She volunteered in the Nebraska correctional system for 26 years.

She's been active in the Women's Equity Action League and the National Organization for Women (NOW). Once the host of a public affairs television show, “Frankly Female,” she's alarmed that women's hard-earned reproductive and medical care rights are in jeopardy. She told a reporter: “Men want to tell us what we can and cannot do. Why do you think women are still dying, in my opinion, needlessly and prematurely from breast cancer? (Polk's a breast cancer survivor). Look who controls the money. Women have wealth but they give power to men. We cannot let things happen the way they're happening. We cannot lose the rights women fought for. We have to stand up.”

She authored the book “Black Men and Women of Nebraska” published by the Nebraska Black History Preservation Society.

“I wrote it because as I traveled around the state I was often asked to come back and speak to women auxiliaries and different civic organizations and they would always ask if there was anybody else like Senator (Ernie) Chambers in Nebraska, and I didn't really have an answer to that. So I decided to do some research and out of that came ‘Black Men and Women of Nebraska.’”

The book highlights such pioneers as George Flippen, the first Black football player at Nebraska,

Elizabeth Pittman, the first woman and person of color to serve on the District Court bench, and Eugene Skinner, the first Black principal and administrator in the Omaha Public Schools.

In 2005 her son Marlon Polk became the first Black man to be named a district court judge in Nebraska. He still serves on the bench today

“He was appointed by (Republican) Governor (Dave) Heinemann,

which was extraordinary because most people know I'm a stark raving Democrat,” quipped Donna.

She's twice been a Democratic National Convention delegate and she's active in the Women of Color Nebraska Caucus.

She left state government in 1985 to head the Lincoln Indian Center. In 1991 she transitioned to lead NUIHC. “I just completed my 31st year as the leader of this phenomenal organization.”

Called to Serve

Why is she still at it? “It's the idea that I can help somebody suffering from addiction or anxiety or depression or homelessness. It doesn't get better than this. I don't know what I would do if I didn't know I needed to be somewhere every day.

“We have a lot of people identified as leaders because they are agreeable. They don't cause any ruckus. I'm going to cause ruckus. I think a lot of people are not given opportunities because of the color of their skin. That's very hurtful. It, of course, happened to me. It's just sad we're like that as a country.”

Polk appreciates the many mentors who've impacted her and enjoys doing the same for others.

“I am so privileged to play that role. I never thought about getting old. I never thought about the fact one day somebody would come to me to ask what I think and to help them.”

The local native community has adopted her.

“I've had the privilege to be adopted into families among the Omaha people. It's very important to me to be accepted as a family member and have people calling me sister, grandma, niece, Little Mom, and to be invited into ceremonies.”

The longer she's worked with the indigenous community, the more she's identified with the diasporas of her African and native heritages.

“Some of my ancestors were brought over bound and shackled in the holds of ships to become slaves and other ancestors were relocated

and forced to move to lands they often couldn't assimilate onto. I learned about native people and this whole relocation. That's why gentrification is such a sensitive subject to me because I see how people are literally moved out of neighborhoods and housing they've been in forever just so somebody who has no relationship to it can have it. It's stunning. Imagine if this was your land and you had to see how it was desecrated, trash on the street, the water polluted, the air foul, the ground full of lead and other contaminants.

“Being a part of this community has helped me understand trauma. I've learned by listening to what people say. I learned as a therapist to ask a very important question – what happened to you?”

The ills bedeviling the native population are well documented.

“When I started at the Lincoln Indian Center in '85 in counseling it was alcohol decimating Indian communities. Now it's opioids and methamphetamines, especially laced with fentanyl. We're doing everything we can to address that issue.”

Mental health is another priority.

“We must change the system. It's just like any chronic disease. You need to be able to go into a facility that is culturally competent to help you whether you're LGBTQ or a racial or ethnic minority, a senior citizen, a kid. You have to be able to get those services and not have to wait weeks until Medicaid or insurance kicks in. We have to do something. There's plenty of opportunities to be innovative with walk-in facilities where you can get an assessment. We can do that.

But we just have to change the way we do business.

“It shouldn't take a pandemic to make people see you should be able to pick up your iPad or smartphone and get online with your therapist. Just like we have caregivers go to older persons' homes, we can do that with kids not doing well in school or suffering from anxiety, depression, trauma.”

There's no lack of pressing issues when it comes to American Indians.

“We're increasing our focus on missing and murdered Indian women because we find more attention is paid to missing people who are not native than those that are native. We have joined a national initiative to try to bring attention to that issue.

“The other issue we are very keenly interested in is what's happening with the bodies being found on the land of boarding schools, including the recent discovery of up to 80 bodies buried at the former Genoa Indian Industrial School in central Nebraska.”

Meanwhile, she hopes her prescription for a divided America is heeded.

“Be compassionate and kind to one another. Break down walls, try to understand what your neighbor is going through. That's the only way we're going to survive as a country.”

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