

THE FIRST ✿ THE ONLY

Vero Beach

Magazine®

JANUARY 2022

*Nancy and Dan Ozizmir's
new home in John's Island is*

A Slice of Paradise





BY JEFFREY R.
PICKERING

Hello in There

ADDRESSING ISSUES THAT FACE INDIAN RIVER COUNTY SENIORS
ENHANCES OUR COMMUNITY

America is an aging nation. According to AARP, people age 65 and over will outnumber children under 17 by 2034. Tending to the quality of life of older adults is important, especially in Indian River County, where seniors already represent one-third of our residents.

The 2019 Indian River County Community Needs Assessment found that, of the 50,000 adults in our community over age 65, one out of every five lives in poverty. Many lack transportation, and a larger percentage of them are disabled than the state's average. Many are women who live alone on low incomes.

Singer-songwriter John Prine, a two-time Grammy winner, penned a lyric that sums up the



Visits from Senior Resource Association volunteers like Denise Hegener can help stave off loneliness and improve seniors' quality of life.

experience faced by a growing percentage of Indian River County's population as they move beyond age 65 and into their golden years:

*Old trees just grow stronger.
Old rivers grow wider every day.
Old people just grow lonesome.
Waiting for someone to say,
"Hello in there. Hello."*

This month, I'm looking at the status of seniors in Indian River County, including what they need and how we are doing as a community to serve them today and into the future.

While our county is a wonderful place for seniors to retire and live out their golden years, the data show that the prospect of doing so is better for some residents than others. Namely, white residents with the highest household

incomes, most of whom live on the barrier island, live an average of 87 years. In Gifford, Indian River County's predominantly Black community, life expectancy is the lowest in the county. Residents there live, on average, 12 fewer years than their beachside neighbors. These two communities are separated by less than a 4-mile distance, yet their residents experience statistically significant differences in life expectancy.

When I think about what this disparity in life expectancy means for me, I rest assured knowing that, statistically, my race, household income and the zip code of my home align with those of other Indian River County residents who live longer lives. However, I can't help but think of what I

According to AARP, people age 65 and over will outnumber children under 17 by 2034.

might have missed out on if certain people in my life had been dealt this "dirty dozen" and died 12 years too soon.

Many of my clients and a majority of the board of directors who recruited me as Indian River Community Foundation's CEO in 2015 are somewhere between 75 and 87 years old. Most are white and a large percentage of them live on the barrier island.

If they lived in Gifford, it is unlikely that I would have even known many of them or shared in the joy of helping them with their philanthropy.

My maternal grandmother, Barbara Merrill, died in 2017 at the age of 90. A Vermont native, "Mamie" as we affectionately called her, moved to Winter Park, Florida, in 1957 and raised five children, 14 grandchildren,



St. Francis Manor in Vero Beach addresses the issue of social isolation with affordable and independent living for seniors.



Social gatherings are an important part of a healthy lifestyle for residents at St. Francis Manor.



Alzheimer and Parkinson Association of IRC operates a social respite program in several locations throughout the county.

and 25 great-grandchildren. She had a full life, living independently until her last day, supported by family, friends and her strong faith. Had she died 12 years sooner, she would never have met my wife, Stephanie, our children, Colin, Olivia and Grant, nor any of her great-grandchildren. Instead, her longevity helped to propel a new generation into the 21st century and anchors mine to a greater purpose.

While this life

expectancy disparity is troubling, the good news is that several local charitable organizations are starting to close that gap. They are addressing the health conditions that lead to shorter lifespans. After cancer and heart disease, accidents in the home represent the third-highest cause of death among county residents. Stroke, chronic respiratory disease, Alzheimer's disease and diabetes follow, all of which have higher rates

While this life expectancy disparity is troubling, the good news is that several local charitable organizations are working to close that gap.

among the 65-and-older population.

Four organizations, Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital, Sebastian River Medical Center, Treasure Coast Community Health, and Whole Family Health Center, provide the backbone of our community's continuum of care. Financial support from taxpayers through the Indian River County Hospital District affords low-income seniors emergency, primary medical, behavioral

and dental health services through these partners and other community-based organizations.

The McCabe Connections Center at the Mental Health Collaborative provides services that have become essential to local seniors' quality of life. Adults 65 and older in Indian River County experience higher rates of mood or depressive disorders than the state average, as well as higher rates of binge drinking. Whether triggered by

the death of a spouse or brought on over time from the isolation of living alone, untreated depression can lead to more complications. McCabe Connections staff help these residents obtain psychiatric care and access specialized programs like those operated by Alzheimer and Parkinson's Association of Indian River County.

When it comes to addressing other social determinants of health for seniors, the Senior

Resource Association is Indian River County's lead agency for home- and community-based services. In addition to operating the GoLine public transportation system and senior centers throughout the county, the organization provides case management services and other programs to meet the needs of older adults. With 56% of Indian River County seniors living more than a mile away from stores selling fresh



The Senior Resource Association's Meals on Wheels program provides a daily hot meal to seniors who need it; the visits also serve as wellness checks and provide opportunities for seniors to engage in conversation with people who care.

produce, SRA's Meals on Wheels program ensures that hundreds of low-income seniors receive hot, nutritious meals and other support to keep living independently in their homes for as long as possible.

Social isolation among low-income seniors is also being addressed creatively through communities like those at St. Francis Manor. This charitable organization provides affordable, independent living to senior citizens on limited incomes in an attractive, safe and socially supportive environment. Since 1974,

thousands of seniors have lived happy, productive golden years on this campus, which completed an expansion in 2018, funded almost exclusively by philanthropy.

Many seniors nearing the end of life require a place other than their home to receive the care they need. The VNA Hospice House was built to serve this population, some of whom pay privately or with insurance, while others receive charitable care funded by VNA's endowment. All are guaranteed a peaceful, dignified place to spend their final days.

Had John Prine paid a visit to Vero Beach and Indian River County before his own death, I hope he would have seen much to admire in how we care for our neighbors as they age. He offers some simple advice that all of us can follow:

So if you're out walking down the street sometime, and spot some hollow ancient eyes. Please don't just pass them by and stare as if you didn't care. Say "Hello in there. Hello."

Continuing to support organizations that care for seniors in Indian River County is an investment

in our future well-being. In addition to this column, Indian River Community Foundation provides additional resources at ircommunityfoundation.org to help you make more informed giving decisions.

There are many good places to live, but you have chosen this special community, a place where we "say hello." I encourage you to continue to give generously and to use the foundation's resources to make giving decisions that can lead to something better, something healthier for our community's seniors. ☀