

spring 2023

ECHOES

UNDER THE RIMS

MEANING



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

page 3

SANCTUARY

The Pond

page 7

CONNECTIONS

The Family Feeling

page 13

MISSION

Leaving Fingerprints

page 5

INNOVATION

Trends in Independent Living

page 9

VOCATION

Awakening Artistry

ABIDING & ADAPTING

Meaningful living



I WAS RECENTLY AT AN OUTDOOR playground with our two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Annika. Her parents and grandmother were there also. I watched Annika move from one playground station to the next, with equal exuberance for all stations. She began at the swing set and then made her way to hiding in a castle from an imaginary bear. Next, she was climbing the slide platform before returning to castle to hide again from that bear. Soon, she was back at the swing set and so on.

Before Annika's parents called time to go, the simple act of climbing up and down steps that were half her height provided an obvious sense of accomplishment and cast a smile upon her face. Toddlers are so expressive. There is no guessing about their moods. Toddlers also do not bother much with planning their days or thinking about big-life questions. They tend to live in the moment, explore the world around them as they find it, pursue fun, and bathe

in learning as they take in one new experience after another. It is a delight to behold such pure joy of discovery and wonder.

As children mature into young adulthood, learning from new experiences and the pursuit of fun activities both continue, but day planning becomes necessary and big-life questions begin to surface. The matters of meaning-making and pursuit of a meaningful life also emerge and continue into older adulthood.

Meaning-making is the process of how people construe, understand, and make sense of life events, relationships, and the self. Having a meaningful life reflects the feeling that one's existence has significance, purpose, and coherence. Medical research studies confirm the important role meaning-making has with regard to physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual well-being.

Some of these studies echo and cite the earlier work of Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl (1905-1997). Following his grim experience of living three years within a World War II concentration camp at Auschwitz, Frankl wrote a seminal book about humanity's search for meaning. Within his book, Frankl shares observations and submits that people function best when they possess life purpose and perceive a sense of meaning in their life engagements.

Within this issue of Echoes are three stories about meaning-making and meaningful life pursuits. Voices within these stories include those of St. John's residents and employees. A fourth story tells of changes coming to the St. John's Center for Generations and the meaningful intergenerational connections it provides. Another story reveals trends in elder care and meaningful living.

As you engage with these stories and photos, perhaps you may consider your own pursuits of meaning-making and what meaningful living is for you.

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THE POND

Photo by Dan Sullivan

ALONG THE SHORELINES OF Montana rivers, lakes, ponds, and sloughs, the sound of human-generated duck calls is heard during the waterfowl hunting season. The aim of a duck call is to mimic the voice of wild ducks in order to lure birds into shooting range over floating decoys that are stationed in water. Calling ducks is as much an art as it is a hunting strategy.

Along the southern side of Mission Ridge apartments at St. John's United, the sound of human-generated duck calls is rare. The sound of actual ducks, though, is common. This is due to a pond that attracts and hosts waterfowl within and around its waters during non-winter months.

Instead of people enticing ducks to come near, it is the ducks that entice people to come near. For nearly a quarter century, elder residents, employees, neighbors, and children of St. John's Center for Generations have enjoyed viewing the pond's waterfowl and features.

The notion of a pond at Mission Ridge was first imagined and later constructed by Bill Lowe. Bill and his wife, Connie, who had a ranch outside of Big Timber, were among the earliest residents at Mission Ridge. Bill was born and raised in Glendive, Montana. Following World War II, he started Lowe Construction in Billings, which constructed the original St. John's Lutheran Home building. Bill was

a state senator from Yellowstone County in the 1970's. He also served for six years as a member of the St. John's Board of Directors.

Bill's daughter, Pam Lowe, tells that her father once loved to hunt ducks with his father. Pam adds, "Dad got to the point, though, where he just appreciated the birds so much that he stopped hunting them and got involved in working with the International Wild Waterfowl Association to propagate birds and exchange birds throughout the country and beyond." In fact, Bill acquired a federal permit to raise waterfowl. He eventually established a bird sanctuary near Big Timber known as Wild Bird Resources, Incorporated.

When Bill transformed a mud hole to catch storm runoff at Mission Ridge into what is now the duck pond, he first populated it with exotic birds that were pinioned – wing tips clipped to prevent them from flying away. In addition to thirty exotic species, wild flyers such as mallards found their way to the pond. In Pam’s perspective, “The duck pond effort was a calling for my dad. He loved it, and so many people loved viewing the birds.”

When the Mission Ridge pond was formally dedicated in 1999, the President and CEO of St. John’s, Kent Burgess, made this observation: “What I see that makes the project unusual is that it’s resident driven.” Which was true. The pond was constructed by volunteer labor and sustained by donations, much of which was contributed by Mission Ridge residents.

When the pond’s founder and primary caretaker died in 2006, the era of exotic birds swimming in its waters came to an end. Wild ducks continued to inhabit the pond, though. Employees maintained the site but sustainability was challenging.

In 2019, Steve and Linda Fenter of Billings moved into a Mission Ridge apartment. The Fenters knew about the pond long before they became residents. Steve tells, “I knew Bill Lowe all my life. I was his campaign manager when he ran for state senate. Pam and I were in the seventh grade together. So, Linda and I have been associated with the Lowes since we were young.”

After settling into Mission Ridge, it was not long before the Fenters

had an itch to explore what could be done about revitalizing the pond site and its viewing house. Steve explains, “With us living right above the pond on the third floor of Mission Ridge, we could see that vegetation was overgrown and had overtaken the area. When Bill Lowe passed, there was no one who took on overseeing that the pond received the kind of attention it really needed. That first summer we lived here, we were not sure we had any permission to enter into the pond area to begin working with it. We visited with management and were wisely cautioned about matters of safety and health, for our own benefit. But when the second summer came around, there were a number of us who decided to go at fixing up the area. Given my relationship with Bill Lowe, I felt it needed some attention.”

Linda recalls, “When we moved into Mission Ridge we had no ambition to work with the duck pond but it soon became one of those things that just happened. Now, we enjoy staying active, getting outside, and

helping to create more beautiful surroundings.”

In addition to the Fenters, there are many Mission Ridge residents who have eagerly helped with the pond site’s rejuvenation. Arnold Clark has trimmed trees and shrubs. John Sery has reconstructed nesting boxes. Don Russell has moved rocks and features. Judy Frank, Connye Hartman, Debbie Brace, and Joy

continued on next page...



Linda & Steve Fenter



Rogers have worked on flower gardens. The viewing house was cleaned and painted in a group effort. The doorway and viewing window were widened. A feeding program was launched for small birds, inclusive of no-mess feed, and supported by resident donations. “People just showed up and volunteered,” Linda says.

When Judy Frank was questioned about her interest in flower gardening around the pond, she expressed these thoughts: “Volunteering is such a freeing experience. I like the freedom of showing up when it fits into my schedule and it gives me such a wonderful sense of accomplishment. I really like working around the pond and adding to its beauty because I can.

I like flowers. My friends and I like planting flowers that bees prefer because we want bees to thrive. I know there will be a time when I can no longer do this, but

*“If there is magic
on this planet,
It is contained in
water”*

— Loren Eiseley

right now I’m strong enough and feel really good when I’m out by the pond working. People enjoy the ducks and enjoy the little ducklings.”

St. John’s grounds employees appreciate the investment that resident volunteers have made into improving the pond area and residents express equal appreciation of employee efforts. “We encourage and help one another. We work together,” observes Steve Fenter. “The pleasure people get from viewing the ducks – especially children – excites me. There have been many people involved with the pond through the years in some shape or form, directly and indirectly. I don’t know what the pond will become in the future. We’ll see. It was meaningful to Bill who started it all and it’s still meaningful to those of us living here now.”





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TRENDS IN INDEPENDENT LIVING

GEORGE ORWELL WROTE, “EACH generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.” While it’s challenging to be the arbiter of intelligence and wisdom, there is no question that each generation is unique, shaped by experiences such as war and peace, disease and well-being, and financial hardships and prosperity, causing each to devolve away from the tendencies of their forbearers to adopt new and innovative ways of living.

The ever-evolving landscape of elder care is no exception. A century ago, caring for older adults happened in the home, as the average life expectancy in the United States was

just 58. By 1958, when residents in the Billings community began to conceptualize a senior housing project to be named St. John’s, life expectancy had jumped to 68. Expectations of institutionalized care for older adults was basic: older adults should have clean, serviceable living conditions with social opportunities and three square meals a day.

The unstructured and inconsistent nature of institutionalized settings in the 1970s and ‘80s led to the establishment of the Residents’ Bill of Rights by the federal 1987 Nursing Home Reform Law. The law required nursing homes to “promote and protect the rights of each resident” and highlighted

individual dignity and self-determination. Residents’ Rights established that individuals had the right to do things most of us take for granted: such as wearing one’s own clothes, bringing personal items from home to decorate a living space, receiving visitors, and having a voice in one’s care.

The 1990s took the concept of autonomy to the next level as elder care advocates ushered in the era of person-centered care. The Eden Alternative, a movement that took residents’ rights a step further, made the nursing home environment more home-like by incorporating plants and animals, and ensuring more choices and care that was personalized for each individual.

These person-centered movements in skilled nursing care undoubtedly led over to independent living communities that began popping up in droves during the same time. A standard of practice for independent living developed and has remained fairly consistent over the last twenty-five years, but the Baby Boomers are changing things. Modern adults can expect to live well beyond previous generations, and the focus has evolved to individuality, flexibility, and quality of life.

Thoughtful Design and Architecture

The modern older adult has no desire to live in the same traditional environments of their parents' generation. They are seeking out communities that are filled with natural sunlight and abundant green spaces. Many communities are installing amenities such as dog parks and pickleball courts. Living spaces boast large windows, open concepts and finishes that can be personalized for each occupant.

Sophisticated Dining

Make no mistake, community life still centers around food, but the "three square meals" a day regimen is a thing of the past. The senior living industry standard is now offering cafes, bistros, and coffee shops that serve a diverse spread of healthy options throughout the day. Residents, staff, and guests dine together and also have the option of grabbing a snack or a latte between appointments.

Personal Expression and Growth

Baby Boomers who are coming of age seek life enrichment

opportunities that delve deeper than the beloved favorites Bingo and sing-a-longs. Modern older adults are seeking meaningful life-long learning opportunities with an academic focus in areas such as history, literature, and the arts. Physical activities in the form of swimming, yoga classes, aerobics, and tai chi continue to grow in popularity and have become mainstays in retirement communities across the country.

Technology that Works

More and more communities are moving away from paper calendars to interactive, user-friendly smart devices such as tablets and apps that give residents the ability to interact with community events, view menus, and message staff in real time. Some offer wearable devices that can not only provide emergency assistance, but track vital statistics to help individuals monitor their health goals.

Access to Healthcare

Independent Living communities of the past would provide limited transportation to and from medical appointments. Today, a growing number of communities have added on-site primary care clinics that offer urgent care as well as routine medical appointments. This allows residents the convenience of point-of-care services with a provider who is accessible and can continue to follow them if healthcare needs increase.

Community

Senior housing developments have historically been insular retreats with amenities strictly for use by the residents, somewhat cut off from society. The most

modern communities are building spaces and programming that can be utilized by both residents and community members alike. Intergenerational programming, classes that are open to the local community, and professional performances are being woven into the fabric of senior-focused communities. Amenities such as privately owned restaurants, retail stores – and in one community, even a medical marijuana shop – are being added into the master design of retirement communities around the country.

Only the history books, written hundreds of years from now, will be able to discern just which generation, if any, was wiser. In the meantime, St. John's continues to strive to be on the cutting edge of service delivery, providing the highest quality of care, most diverse living opportunities, and a consistently nurturing environment filled with hope, dignity, and love.✦



THE FAMILY FEELING

MOST PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED TO learn that St. John's has been quietly operating a childcare center for over twenty-five years. Isn't St. John's a nursing home? Why provide child care? The childcare ministry began in 1996 as a partnership between King of Glory Lutheran Church and St. John's to support workforce needs. The preschool was located at the church for five years before relocating to St. John's West End campus. Once on campus, Center for Generations (CFG) Child Care became the first childcare in the state to be located within a retirement community.

Having the children on campus has brought joy to the residents. "When

I started at St. John's sixteen years ago, we had a room to play in at the end of two nursing care hallways. One of the elders would wheel himself down the hallway every day to play ball with the kids. Even at 100+ years old, he found joy and excitement in the children!" recalls Sarah Forney, CFG Director.

Intergenerational activities begin on day one as the babies are walked around campus in six-seat strollers. Toddlers have dance parties with elders, and the preschoolers play games and share lunchtime meals in the nursing home. "One of my favorites is playing Bingo," says CFG Assistant Director Aubourn Shaules. "It's meaningful to look around and see people from age 4-100 all playing the same game, happy to be there, and eager to win. The excitement is contagious."

Elly Frickel, 20, attended CFG from the time she was three months old until third grade and remembers her time fondly. "I don't ever remember being afraid of the grandmas and grandpas," says Elly. "My mom says that I would gravitate towards the people who were in wheelchairs or had oxygen." Sarah echoes Elly's experience, "We have so many parents tell us that their children aren't afraid of elderly they see out in the community. They walk up to people with a walker or in a wheelchair with confidence and ease."

CFG's waiting list is long, but

despite high demand for services, capacity has slowly waned over the last ten years. Inflation, the cost of care, and staffing shortages have challenged childcare providers across the country. This resulted in the State of Montana being awarded \$110 million in one-time funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The money was earmarked to support childcare providers' operating expenses as they faced higher expenses during the pandemic as well as to expand childcare infrastructure. St. John's United was one of thirty childcare providers who received funding to both support and expand childcare services.

"The connections we make in the course of a life — maybe that's what heaven is."

— Fred Rogers



With the present model, St. John's is only able to serve fifty children. "Without this grant, we would have been forced to close CFG," says President and CEO David Trost. "Now, we are able to expand our services by renovating a part of our Legacy building. Our new model will increase the available slots



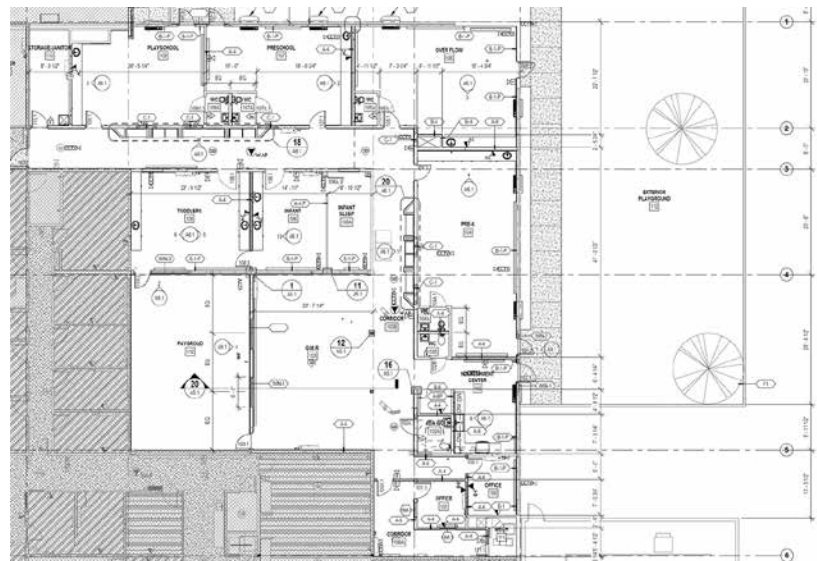
to children ages 0-5 by fifteen percent.” The new space will now be centrally located and closer to Chapel Court Apartments, making intergenerational collaboration more accessible.

The innovation is more than just a new space, it includes a new business model: Expanding stakeholders. Historically, St. John’s employees have had priority over all others for childcare spaces. Now, community businesses will be able to purchase shares that give their employees priority on a rotating basis. “Our new membership model allows other businesses to offer childcare to their employees as a recruitment and retention tool. The membership fee they pay will allow us to increase wages for childcare providers in an effort to increase staffing to desired levels and allow Center for Generations to remain

an integral part of the nurturing environment at St. John’s,” says David.

The new center is slated for completion in fall of 2023 with the promise of more consistent and meaningful connections. “Having young children grow up

around older adults gives them the appreciation for their elders. The life experience they can share with them is very special,” says Elly. Aubourn agrees, “I like being a part of things at St. John’s. It’s all about the ‘family’ feeling.” ♦





AWAKENING ARTISTRY

AGE IS JUST A NUMBER; OLD IS a state of mind. It is said that to stop learning is to grow old, regardless of the number of one's years. Lifelong learners tend to be curious about the world around them – its people, places, and cultures; they embrace change and are open to new ideas – they know there is more than one way to see

the world and their place in it.

Mission Ridge resident Bernice Bjertness, a retired nurse and hospice director, and Tom Schlotterback, St. John's United VP of Mission Advancement, share their thoughts on lifelong learning and vocation.

Bernice, what brought you to Mission Ridge at St. John's United?

Six years ago, about a year before my husband Don died, he decided it was time that we considered living in a place with even less maintenance than our patio home. I didn't realize how poor his health was and looking back, I think he wanted me to be set in a place that would be good for me for years to come. We spent that first year getting acclimated and enjoying the various activities together.

In your time at Mission Ridge, what life enrichment opportunities stand out most to you?

I've enjoyed many things over the years – topical and historical lectures, the music programs – but most recently, I appreciated the Awakening Vocation in Older Adults workshop offered by Tom Schlotterback. In those sessions, I was invited to look at poetry, music, myself. The workshop offered me an opportunity for self-reflection and to think about new beginnings. If I hadn't participated in that workshop, I would never have signed up for a painting class which has become my new passion.

Had you ever painted before?

Never. I had done a bit of quilting and sewing, which is also about color, patterns, and textures, but never thought I could paint. The instructor, Mike Capser, guides the class through the painting

process (*photo left*). I love all of the colors we get to work with and I am always amazed at how the pieces turn out – they look so professional. I proudly frame them and display them on my walls. Many of the pieces we have done have been evocative of memories for me – an old barn reminds me of my childhood on a ranch; the cardinal painting reminds me of Don as we watched the cardinals at our daughter’s place in Minnesota.

Do you have a favorite medium to work in or a particular theme that you enjoy?

Not really because I enjoy it all – it’s something new every time. We have painted quite a few landscapes and wildlife scenes. Our next project is a floral scene, which we haven’t done before, and it’s in watercolor. We’re just getting started, but it’s fascinating to see how the watery, diluted hues bleed into one another to make a flower come to life.

Tom, what was the intent of the vocation workshop?

I am delighted that Bernice found the workshop meaningful. The intent was to create a deliberate pedagogical and contemplative experience that would awaken a meaningful sense of vocation within older adults. Quantitative and qualitative data collected from participants provided evidence that outcomes of the experience matched intent.

Were there common themes that emerged among workshop participants?

Life story telling with others, including use of photography



Paintings by Bernice Bjertness

and objects, generated rich conversations and heightened self-awareness. Poetry and music prompted participants to contemplate and explore their sense of life meaning and purpose in ways that were novel and expansive. Intellectual and theological learning about the concept of vocation stirred curiosity and spawned inquiry. Some participants who were retired from employment thought their life vocation was essentially over, but discovered that they still had vocational callings to engage with, which was a pleasing and joyful discovery.

How do you see these discoveries informing life enrichment opportunities for older adults at St. John’s?

Participants within this awakening vocation experience unanimously affirmed that there should be an ongoing offering of this program to residents of St. John’s communities. One participant added, “This is not just for older people. It’s valuable for anyone.” To offer this programmed experience in an ongoing way would require someone capable of structuring and leading the effort and resources to support and sustain the effort.



Bernice, has anything surprised you about finding a new vocation?

I absolutely am more attentive to my surroundings – I see colors and shapes with a new eye. Even now, when the mid-winter landscape is all the same drab color, I watch how shadows play and create their own beauty. The world is such a vibrant place if you will just notice it. I notice it more than I used to. ✦



LEAVING FINGERPRINTS

THERE'S AN OLD STORY THAT TELLS of a man who encounters brick layers as he is walking down the street. He inquires what the first worker is doing and the worker responds curtly, "Obviously, I'm laying bricks." The man continues walking and asks a second man what he is doing. The reply, "I'm building a brick wall." On meeting a third brick worker, he asks again. This time the response is wholly different: With gusto, the worker exclaims, "I am building a cathedral." This man was clearly on a mission.

Study after study shows that what defines work as meaningful is subjective, but those who frame their work as being in the service of something important report higher levels of meaning and satisfaction in that work. The element of *something important* trumps compensation, benefit packages, or employee appreciation for those

seeking meaningful work.

Cole Harden, Senior Regional Officer for St. John's United, understands the connection between mission and meaningful work in his executive leadership of St. John's remote locations in Hamilton, Laurel, Red Lodge, Billings Heights and statewide At Home services. As a high school student, Harden's first job was at St. John's as an Elder Chabar. He was tasked with keeping nursing home residents occupied after the evening meal in order to prevent the boredom and wandering that led to falls. There was nothing prescriptive about his job duties — he was there to be a presence in order to keep residents safe. "I could have just sat there and monitored the residents, but I didn't do that. I spent my time holding their hands, talking, playing simple games. Before long, I was getting far more out of the

relationship than they were. As a young person, I'm not sure I could completely internalize the mission, but I knew I wasn't just doing a job."

The notion of being in service to others led Harden to return to St. John's after college as an administrative intern while waiting for admission to dental school. Instead, he found himself pursuing a graduate program in healthcare administration. In the fifteen years that have followed, as is typical with vocational callings, opportunities to stay and grow within St. John's have continued to present themselves. "The heart of servant leadership is always alive here," says Harden.

A recently published study of Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that of all vocations, healthcare and social workers rate themselves highest as doing

the most meaningful work. Yet those workers also report some of the highest work-related stress levels. Clearly, the nature of the work outweighs the frustrations, especially in light of the current environment of shortages of and competition for healthcare workers. St. John's Legacy Director of Nursing Mark Wagstaff is called upon to lead frontline healthcare at St. John's – those who provide the hands-on, day-to-day care for older adults in assisted living and skilled care settings.

Wagstaff came to St. John's in 2022 with nearly thirty years of healthcare experience spanning the spectrum of care from personal caregiver to EMT to nurse with administration expertise. "I didn't go into nursing because I was going to get rich," he reports. "I came to St. John's because the words on the wall (the mission statement) are exactly what's practiced here." Wagstaff translates that to his staff at every opportunity. He understands the pressure they are under and strives to create an environment where they will be successful as a team. He keeps the



Mark Wagstaff
Legacy Director of Nursing



focus not on how much work there is to be done, but on the people the work is being done for.

A Marvel Universe enthusiast, Wagstaff's office is filled with visual representations of the movie characters. He likens healthcare workers to those superheroes: "When everyone runs away, healthcare workers run in. We care for people at their worst moments. We answer the call at 2:00 a.m. out of a deep love for the patient and for the work because no one else is there to do it. It's no different here at St. John's."

Kelly Schallenberger, Senior Administrative Officer, Support Services (Human Resources), notes that research on work and purpose is instructive for attracting and retaining excellent staff. "When

St. John's hires employees, I'm fortunate to have leaders like Mark and Cole guiding them. Every day I see employees who give the best of themselves here and I know it has something to do with our culture. They know that their work matters. Those people are more likely to stay with us long-term."

Cole Harden captures the essence of work at St. John's this way: "St. John's is a place where life exists. Our mission is the point of what everyone does regardless of their job title. I hope our staff and volunteers know that their fingerprints are all over this place; what they touch makes a difference for the people we serve. They – we – are doing God's work with our hands." ✦



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