



# It Takes a Village

**Neighbors Network** helps area seniors remain in their homes as they age.

By Kevin Fritz

**I**t takes a village, as the expression goes, but these days it's much more than an idiom. It's become a way of life for **Kathy** and **Mark Mason** of Orlando, who wish to live in their home as they age. Neighbors Network, the first program of its kind in Florida, provides volunteer services to senior citizens like the Masons who join its virtual village.

"It is a terrific organization. The time has come for folks who are in this Silver Tsunami," says Kathy, referring to the vast number of baby boomers entering their senior years. Based on census data, 10,000 people a day will turn 65 for the next 15 years at which time 18 percent of the nation's population will be age 65 and older.

For the past decade, virtual village-type organizations have been sprouting up nationwide, many taking a page from the success of the nationally acclaimed Beacon Hill Village in Boston that set the stage for membership-based communities for seniors who are opting not to move to a retirement community. There is now

an estimated 140 villages nationwide helping senior citizens age in place.

An initiative funded by the Winter Park Health Foundation (WPHF), Neighbors Network currently boasts 35 members who pay an annual membership fee of \$375 per person or \$500 per household. **Diana Silvey**, WPHF program director, says launching a virtual village in the Orlando area was a natural solution to the growing number of elderly who wish for independence. "People don't want to leave their homes," she says. "Neighbors Network allows them to engage in their community and environment of choice."

**Annette Kelly**, PhD, ARNP, Advisory Council chair and a member of Neighbors Network, says these village programs also serve as an opportunity for the elderly to recognize that they need assistance. She notes that no one likes to admit they are getting old or need help.

"We need to change the vision of ourselves as we get older," she believes. "It's all about support, assistance and

companionship. We have to recognize that we need to live a different way, and if we don't plan our aging, we are heading for trouble."

She adds that society must also do its part. "We have to address our aging population in a positive way, not in a clinical way," she says. "Aging is not a clinical issue, it's a demographic one."

Some of the volunteer services that can be requested by members of Neighbors Network include computer support, pet sitting, reading/sorting mail, personal visits, grocery shopping and household tasks. Neighbors Network also offers social activities for members. This past Christmas, volunteers helped the Masons and others in the community decorate their homes and trim their trees.

"I joined because I saw what was ahead," Kathy adds. "I want to remain in my home, healthy and happy." **L**

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For more information about Neighbors Network, visit our website at [CentralFloridaLifestyle.com](http://CentralFloridaLifestyle.com).