



grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

In a new fortnightly series for seniors, Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages explores the needs of seniors wanting to live independently.

making connections and filling gaps

Retirement can be a blessing. For some of us it is the best time of our lives, with more time for friends and to contribute to our communities and marae.

We may take up new interests. I am exploring the harbour margins on a paddleboard, exercise that improves my balance. I hope it will ensure I keep upright as I age.

But I know these halcyon days will not last for ever. Once disability bites, we can no longer drive, or we lose loved ones, things may rapidly change and we can become isolated.

Talking to others, I have found many sharing my concern about the difficulties facing seniors and kaumatua. Some of us are personally supporting people here, or travelling long distances to support whanau in other towns.

The demographic changes are stark. Large families are a thing of the past as more people have only one, two, or even no children. As people age, or their friends die or move away, their circle of friends grows ever smaller.

Some of us recall the support we gave neighbours in the 1950s and 1960s. We provided lifts to doctors, mowed their lawn and brought over cooked food when they were ill. Back then we lived in the same house for many years, often with family nearby. We would like to find ways to revive these practices, yet now families are scattered and smaller, and people move house often and may not know their neighbours.

A group of us shared our concerns and decided to take action to reduce isolation and vulnerability among those who wish to stay in

their own homes as they age. We didn't want to set up another social service, but rather a way for people to come together to build relationships and support one another.

Some informal support still happens. A neighbour spent time each week with a man with Alzheimers, while his wife went shopping. However when he went on holiday he felt uncomfortable, knowing the couple would miss out on his support. This is why we feel it is better to work as a team. Then we can offer seamless support, without anyone feeling obliged to do more than they wish.

Our communities are friendly and many supportive relationships are built in volunteer groups and clubs. We want to go beyond this with a key organisation to connect people to one another, and to our many clubs and organisations.

The group will then have a wider set of skills so we can do everything from fixing door locks and smoke alarms, or advocating to ensure everyone gets good health care. We hope to provide whatever is necessary to keep people safe and to give them a sense of wellbeing.

We formed a trust: Eastern Bay Villages: Te Kokoru Manaakitanga. Our vision is one of thriving, inclusive and connected communities, where all seniors and kaumatua have a sense of purpose, belonging, wellbeing and safety. We are now establishing a database so we can match people with similar interests or skills to share.

One senior told me dogs had given her much joy in her life but she could no longer have one since she couldn't walk a dog



anymore. Yet I know working people often leave their dogs alone at home. If we can find a way to match them, this senior could provide doggy day care, resulting in a happy dog and two happy families. Our database could make a real difference.

Our plans are evolving as we explore people's needs and the gaps we can fill. How can all seniors live safely and maintain their homes? How can we increase options for transport once people can no longer drive? How can we ensure everyone has healthy meals?

Towards the end of July we will hold meetings to share our plans, ask for your ideas, and enrol more members. We want to promote intergenerational connections so we will accept members of any age but our focus is on supporting seniors and kaumatua.

We are also keen to discuss ideas with clubs and services. Meanwhile you can find out more from our website: www.easternbayvillages.org.nz.

■ **Eastern Bay Villages: Te Kokoru Manaakitanga meetings:**
Knox Presbyterian Church,
Domain Road,
Thursday, July 26 from 1pm to 3pm
and Tuesday, July 31, 10am to 12 noon.

Thanks to the people who provided feedback from my first column, when I asked for ideas for a column name. I hope you like the one we chose. Some people said they feel like "old farts", while others have "senior moments" but we prefer to emphasise the positive.

– Ruth Gerzon