

Lucas

Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas. We want to welcome a wonderful guest on our program today, John Peterson, with Seniors4Seniors out of Colorado. Welcome to the show.

John

Thank you very much, Lucas.

Lucas

You're so welcome. Well, John, you know, this is such a heartwarming story and something that is so needed, centered in around the topic of seniors and isolation. So isolation around older adults has been a big talking point and it's certainly one of the big qualities that congregate care can offer, but oftentimes there are some gaps that need to be bridged. Talk to us about your son, Eric, and yourself, and tell us the why behind the story of Seniors4Seniors.

John

Okay, thank you, Lucas. So my son, Eric Peterson, he's worked as a care provider in a senior facility, older adult facility, and when he was working there, he obviously was interacting on a daily basis with many, and observing many, older adults, and during that time period he saw that there was a real challenge, many of them faced, and this is pre COVID times as well, but with feelings of isolation and loneliness. And often that led to depression and his heart just reached out to them and he wanted to do something to help that group of people that he was associating with, and bring greater happiness and enrichment to their lives. And along with that, one of the things he found too, is he heard incredible stories. The life experiences of these older adults are incredible. The things that they can share with us, the perspective that they can provide to us as far as how we can, maybe they can help us overcome challenges that we're facing today. And he also saw some of those people pass on. And as a result, those life stories and those life experiences, we might say expired. There was nobody there to share them, and he thought that was a great waste. And he also saw that the youth, particularly high school age youth, were experiencing similar challenges with isolation and loneliness and depression. And we hear about that and the worst manifestations of additive, what we hear about with teenage suicide. And that occurs with older adults sometimes as well. And so Eric had the idea that if there's a way we can bring them to these two groups together, or they could provide friendship and interactions with each other, and the seniors, older adults, they could act as mentors to the youth, and the youth can go ahead in some ways, you know, perhaps regarding technology, even be a mentor to the older adult as well. And that's how Seniors4Seniors, the idea behind it, formed. And then it's been developed since that time, and in December of 2019, we are actually approved as a 501C3 organization.

Josh

Wow. Well, this is really exciting to dive into, I know a lot of our listeners may not have heard of Seniors4Seniors, and hopefully after hearing this episode your phone and your son's phone is ringing off the hook to find out more. But, you know, one of the things that strikes me about what you were talking about there in describing both the young and the old is the isolation. And I think obviously over the last year, year and a half, many of us have felt isolated. It's also interesting though, you know, we've talked about this, but we're probably more connected from a digital standpoint than what we've ever been. But I think one of the things that is lacking in our relationships and probably leading to the isolated feelings is just the intentionality that we lack an intentionality about building relationships with people. You see what people want you to see, but how often do we actually pick up the phone? How often do we actually pay some on a personal visit? How often do we actually ask someone how they're doing and take time to listen to how they're doing? And so I love the intentionality behind this, and I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about how you facilitate the relationship between that, maybe that high schooler, that younger adult and that older adult. What are you guys using as your means of communication and building a relationship so that this isolation feeling is not nearly as bad?

John

Well, once we've identified volunteers that the older adult volunteers, as well as the youth volunteers, want to participate, what we do, and from what we've seen with other similar organizations trying to accomplish this is somewhat unique, and that is we tried to connect them based upon shared interests. And so right at the beginning, once they go on the first things we would share with them is an interest survey. The older adults, we can give them a phone call and fill it out over the phone if they struggle with it in some ways from technology or other perspective and the youth, no problem at all. We sent them over a fillable PDF. They fill that out, send it back to us, and then we connect them together based upon those interests. Now an ideal situation is we can, when we can find that that high school aged youth is interested in a career that one of the senior volunteers worked in. Now talk about a perfect opportunity for the older adult to be able to share information with a youth. And that's why we feel like doing it based upon interests and particularly career interests is so valuable. Now, we can't always do the career interests, but then what if we can find an interest in other areas that we can connect them. But we've had success both ways. An example is there was a youth that was interested in that, and they wanted the FBI, and I just happened to know a retired FBI agent and we connected the two of them. So you can imagine how useful that would be. And so if you think about what I just described it's really quite a simple thing, isn't it?

Josh

It really is, yeah.

John

And yet if I making those, and the next step after that, by the way, once we make those connections, we do a three-way phone call, we introduce them to each other and get them going, get that conversation started and make sure that they're setting the appointment for the next conversation before they've finished that one. And when we've done that, it's interesting because amazing things happen, because they find out that wow, they're learning from each other from the very beginning and they're being uplifted through the experience.

Josh

So John a question I have, you know, I would say we have a vast number of listeners, I would say most of which either work in a senior care community of some type, or they manage multiple senior living properties with a lot of older adults living in them that I know over the last year, many of them have faced the dilemma of feeling isolated because of protocols in the communities and things like that. If there's a listener or someone viewing this on YouTube, that is like, man, you know, that makes sense. What are the steps a community would take with your organization to get a program like this started in their community?

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John

It's really actually very simple. It's a matter of going to the website, Seniors4Seniors, that's with the number 4, as it shows in the icon, or the logo, Seniors4Seniors.org, and there, it gives an overview of the program. There's a landing page they click on, fill in the information, express interest, or they can email us. The email address is GivingBack@Seniors4Seniors.org, and the participants, the youth or the older adults can actually register right there online and start the process. That's how easy it is. The way we describe it for the senior communities is all we need is the name of an interested person and a phone number. And we can take it from there. Because we, I know with all your background in the industry, you recognize that they have planning on their plates in those senior communities right now. They're facing a lot of challenges as far as sufficient manpower and resources. So we don't want to put anything more on their plate, but this is something that could greatly improve the life experience that they're having, that their residents are having, while they're living in those communities.

Lucas

John, let's get into some storytelling, because I know you have to have some amazing stories of these relationships that have been built. Can you recall some special relationships or some stories around a senior and a senior coming together?

John

Yes, and I wish I prepared for this a little bit better, so I could just read it for you, but let me just do my best to describe one. So we actually got a really good start in August of 2020. We had a high school, they sent the invitations out, we had, i think it was 32 youth responded, they wanted to participate in the

program, but think about what was happening as far as with those senior communities in August 2020. They were in lockdown, weren't they? And so we had a challenge of making the connections. But just a few months ago one of the facilities opened back up. We went out there, made a major presentation to the residents, and we had some of them express interest. One of them is named Ruth, and there's this young lady named Reagan, and she waited about eight or nine months before she got her connection. But soon after she went, made her first visit. Now these visits could be done face-to-face, we think that's ideal, but in many situations that it can't happen that way for restrictions or other logistical issues. So it can be done by Zoom meetings like this. It could also be done by telephone. All of those things work. But Reagan actually went there, and spent about 40 minutes, it sounds like, with Ruth. Took a picture, a selfie with her, with Ruth in her wheelchair, and what Reagan said, she couldn't believe how much perspective and how interesting were the life experiences that Ruth shared with her and how valuable they were to her. And she says that it was a highlight, one of the greatest highlights that she'd had recently in her life, having that short interaction with Ruth. And she said, and Ruth expressed the same type of thing with me. And she says it was worth the wait. And I can give you some more as well if you want them.

Lucas

Yeah, we do. You know, that sounds like like a podcast. 40 minutes with Ruth, the story behind intergenerational communication and relationships.

John

And, Ruth is not a youngster. One of the other people we have, she's 92 years old, her name's Neva. But anyway, she's wonderful, very entertaining actually, but we connected her with a young lady named Aisha. Aisha graduated this last year. They had a great relationship and Neva came out of that saying, can I continue to maintain that relationship with Aisha? And Neva wants to participate some more, get connected with another youth, and continue to do it. And anyway, those are some of the results.

Lucas

You know, how many connections, I know that you guys just got your, I think it's 501C3 status. And just recently, how many connections have you guys been able to make over the past number of years?

John

Well, we've only been doing it, if you look at our start, we found out in December, actually in February, we were getting ready to launch it with multiple sites, waiting for a final approval, and that's right when COVID hit. And so we were focusing on person to person visits. We had to step back and actually was a benefit because we realized we didn't have to have it so limited. So we are not anywhere close to where we want to be. But where we're at right now is about a dozen connections, actually. We think of the,

literally hundreds of youth and older adults could benefit from this. But we even have interests coming from India and China and Europe. I have heard about it all over North America.

Josh

Well, you know, I hope this helps to launch Seniors4Seniors. It's a great concept, a great idea. We definitely need all the options that are out there available and the tools for communities to use, to help fight isolation, but also just the wealth of information shared between young and old. We've talked about that a lot on our program, the intergenerational programs like this that exist. So it's good for the young, it's good for the old, something that society needs, something that our industry needs more of. So we obviously wish you guys the best and hope this is a great continued launching pad for you and your mission, your organization, love the heart behind it and the intentionality and building relationships with older adults.

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John

Well, thank you for the opportunity to share it. By the way, one thing is a common question. What does it cost? There's no cost to all the participants, there's no cost to senior communities, there's no cost to the schools or youth organizations. And at some point we'll have to get some funding, but at this point where it is basically funding it with the board members who are made up largely by family.

Lucas

That's beautiful, that's wonderful. It's a no-brainer. What a great thing and a great positive outcome. John Peterson, Seniors4Seniors out of Colorado. Thanks for joining our show today.

John

Thank you, Lucas, and thank you, Josh.

Lucas

And thank you to all our listeners for listening to another great episode of Bridge the Gap.