

Management Values and Practices, Northshore Senior Center, 1983-2007

Some imagine that the goal of senior center staff is to schedule games and activities to keep older people busy. In contrast, at Northshore our job is to greet whoever walks in the door, ask what they want to do and then support them in doing it. The participants become volunteers who bring their friends, build attention to their activities, call others to become involved and watch their programs grow. Senior power has been our banner, and it has built our center into one of the largest and most active in the country.

Everything we do is a team effort, always. The staff, volunteers and participants work together to create the kinds of programs that they want. Some programs are managed completely by volunteers, others require more staff input, but nothing happens without the active participation of seniors in both planning and execution. Each person contributes what they know and care about most. Everyone who wants to be included is included in whatever we do. Anyone who takes responsibility has the right to participate in decisions about the work. Decisions are made together, and include everyone who is affected by them.

Senior empowerment, telephone invitations, and partnerships with one and all have been the foundation blocks of the center. Every week volunteers make dozens of calls to fellow participants, inviting them personally to come to an event or program that they might enjoy. The calls are a reminder about time and place, and about how much we value each member.

In developing our scores of partnerships with outside organizations and municipalities we always ask: What can each one give? What does each one need? How would each one enjoy being thanked and celebrated? And speaking of gratitude, all day long volunteers, staff and participants tell each other thank you for coming, thank you for listening, thank you for helping, thank you for being there.

People initially come in for a variety of reasons--because they have heard from their friends that they like it, or their children are across the country and they are looking for a social outlet, or they need a service that is provided for them here, such as tax aide, counseling, caregiver support. When you're older, your body starts to give out on you in a number of ways, your friends and family may have died, you need services for poor vision or hearing, or financial advice. Some seniors may not have their own social network through churches or clubs, so they come to make friends and learn about something new at a little slower pace. The senior center offers classes that are often taught by seniors and the pace is more relaxed. For example, in the computer classes they may have been struggling to get the basics. Because of their age group and their inexperience, it's like learning a whole science they have never had anything to do with.

Northshore has always been a happy place, with a culture of respect. That culture is expressed in everything we say and do. Its emphasis on relationships as opposed to regulations means that people and their individual needs always come first. The center is there for the seniors, not the seniors for the center. It's easy for people in a position of responsibility, whether paid or unpaid, to become a bit authoritarian, a bit autocratic, a bit too busy to take time to listen. Providing gentle reminders to ourselves and others about respect, dignity and kindness is a daily responsibility that all of us take seriously.

The center works to include everyone by providing transportation services, eliminating financial barriers, and welcoming younger people with disabilities. When people come in they know they're going to be spoken to respectfully, they're going to be acknowledged right away. Our facilities are set up so that the receptionists are seen directly from the entrances. As soon as someone enters the door, they have a friendly face to look at and help immediately at hand.

Our 70 wonderful receptionists are just one group in our volunteer workforce of over 1,000. Periodically, staff is encouraged to review their duties and identify any responsibilities that could be performed by volunteers. The staff person is then freed up to pursue other projects and the seniors have the pleasure of joining a team, learning a skill, and using their talents. In a very real sense, the seniors own and manage the center and its programs; the paid staff is there to support and encourage their efforts. Finding a community where we matter is essential for all of us, but especially for those who need to rebuild a life after multiple losses. Many seniors go on to volunteer formally or informally because they want to share what they've taken in at the center and breathe it back out again.

We look forward to the growing wave of baby boomers, who are already part of the scene at the center. They'll continue to do what they want to do here, creating programs attractive to other baby boomers and bringing information about new trends and aspirations. And they'll stay because they are respected and encouraged to go forward. We also look for the continued growth of the branch senior centers in Woodinville, Kenmore and Mill Creek and the adult day health center in Kirkland. They are homegrown by those wanting a more intimate sense of community in their own neighborhoods, and their cities are proud to support them.

Our adult day health center and health and wellness center are flowering, with the help of the volunteers and the community. The sky bridge, which links the health and wellness center with the senior center, brings together our active senior members with those with more disability and frailty. Combining the two populations enriches the lives of both, and the two buildings provide much needed space for additional community activities. The bridge itself is like a bright ribbon on the gift of the centers.