

AgeSong offers alternative aging perspectives

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Aging is often associated with loss, but it can also be a time of discovery.

Tiburon's Ann Coffey, director and co-founder of AgeSong Marin, a volunteer-led program of small discussion groups for Marin seniors, believes "old age can be a privilege, and that attitude makes all the difference."

Coffey, a retired clinical psychologist, says she gleaned her perspective from the program's co-founder, author Elizabeth Bugental, who wrote "AgeSong: Meditations for Our Later Years." A retired marriage and family counselor, Bugental came up with the idea for AgeSong Marin and Coffey offered to help.

"We took our proposal for an all-volunteer program where seniors could meet and discuss how best to live their later years to the director of the Family Service Agency of Marin, Margaret Hallett," Coffey says.

Hallett liked the idea, and AgeSong Marin was born in 2005; Coffey became director after the death of Bugental in 2009. The program is now under the umbrella of the San Rafael-based nonprofits Buckelew Programs and the Family Service Agency of Marin, which merged in 2012.

The eight-person groups that meet for eight weeks are not therapy groups, but they are therapeutic, Coffey says.

The participants meet to share their insights and experiences and examine everything from dealing with loss, change and retirement, to forging new friendships and finding new fulfillment. New opportunities for joy and connections are discovered.

"As far as I know, we are the only program of its kind in the U.S.," Coffey says.

When Coffey took over as director, there were 10 facilitators. There are now 17 facilitators leading groups and over 225 people from ages 65 to 95

who have participated in the program.

"AgeSong Marin wouldn't exist without Ann Coffey's leadership, her caring approach and exceptional warmth," Hallett says. "She's contributed so much to the organization and to the community, and has brought in and nurtured the very special people who are the group facilitators and who are so committed to AgeSong Marin."

The facilitators are mostly retired mental health professionals, ages 65 and older, with some in their 80s. "They're a great group of people who form the bedrock of the program," Coffey says.

Facilitator Rochelle Teising of Mill Valley, a semi-retired social worker, says in an email that AgeSong Marin participants are able to experience "a safe group in which they can discuss the challenges and opportunities of the aging process. Ann Coffey embodies the spirit and essence of AgeSong Marin. She is a joy to work with, is filled with intellectual curiosity, and is open to new experiences and people.

"Ann accepts the changes of aging with grace and is able to see the big picture. She is optimistic as well as being a realist," Teising says.

"I love doing the groups," Coffey says. "(They) are so much fun — there is lots of laughing and joking as well as poignant sharing of experiences. As facilitators, we get more than we give."

Coffey used to spend 20-30 hours a week at the program until late last year, when the program hired its only paid part-time staff person; now, she spends 15-20 hours a week there.

Most of the group meetings are held at the Family Service Agency in San Rafael, but starting this month the program will offer meetings at the Mill Valley Community Center, which will be more convenient for Tiburon Penin-



Above, AgeSong co-founder Ann Coffey at the Tiburon home that she shares with her husband, Mac Coffey; both are retired clinical psychologists. At left, Ann Coffey leads the 16-member team of volunteer facilitators in discussion at AgeSong Marin's San Rafael office.

JOCELYN KNIGHT PHOTOS / FOR THE ARK

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sula locals, Coffey says.

Many participants make and stay friends. Retired nurse Sheila Ali, a Tiburon resident for over 40 years who recently moved to The Redwoods in Mill Valley, took an AgeSong Marin session and says she made friends with six people who still keep in touch. "I ended up being a facilitator," Ali says.

Of Coffey, she says, "She's the whole package — a very special lady. I have the utmost respect for her intelligence, her smartness and caring; I could go on and on. I'm speaking from the heart — AgeSong Marin's success is because of her."

Sydne Bortel, also of Tiburon, a former social worker

who was the clinical director of the Family Service Agency for 20 years, says Coffey is "one of the most dedicated, generous, highly motivated women who always goes the extra mile."

In addition to her work at AgeSong, Coffey served on the Board of Directors of Adopt a Family of Marin for many years and served as its board president.

Coffey says she often defers to her husband, Mac Coffey, who is also a retired clinical psychologist and who leads some of the program's groups. "He's just a huge, enormous help, my main supporter. He really should be the co-director." Mac Coffey is also a sculptor whose medium is stone.

"I really believe that, as Elizabeth Bugental said, 'Aging is the journey of losing and finding,'" Coffey says.

"I'm proud of the sense of power AgeSong Marin gives the participants, the ability to figure out who they are, what they have and what they can do best at this stage of life."

Contributing writer Ann Mizel is a long-time Strawberry resident and has been with *The Ark* since 1987.