The Hillsdale lady who collects napkins and what it means to age in place

By Erik Vidstrand
The Southwest Portland Post

If you read this reporter's story last month, you know that aging-in-place villages are a group of like-minded individuals in a geographic area who come together to figure out and develop the resources they will need to age comfortably in their own homes.

As an example of aging-in-place, Dr. John Dougherty of Hillsdale, one of the organizers of River West Village, wanted to share an example of what this looks like.

Dougherty has been involved with the "village" concept for several years now. He said that the only way for this concept to work is that it be intergenerational.

"You need to get involved. Take time out of your schedule to look in on elderly residents, and have some fun while you're at it."

Dougherty's neighbor, Arlene Morrison, who would only say she was under the age of 100, has a habit, a unique habit. So unique, a friend of Morrison's, Sandy Johnson, helped support her habit.

Visiting from Alabama last summer, Johnson went out with Morrison to lunch at a local café. Johnson noticed that Morrison grabbed a few napkins as they were leaving. Johnson was curious.

"I've never seen anyone do this," Johnson confessed.

Morrison responded she just preferred them over the cheaper ones she could afford at the market.

"They're heavier duty and do a job better," Morrison explained as if she were on a television commercial for Bounty paper towels.

As it turns out, Morrison had a small collection of napkins at home, some with logos, and some with art. She shared them with Dougherty and her friend.

Upon returning to Alabama, Johnson became a pen pal inserting a colorful napkin in each letter for Morrison to enjoy.

First came the Halloween themes, then Thanksgiving; Christmas was next. Each time a lovely letter described the weather or the latest town gossip or ailment.

A recent Easter theme had just arrived the other day along with a University of Alabama napkin.

Then, Dougherty started collecting them for Morrison. He showed off the Delta Airlines and Amtrak ones he donated. Morrison's granddaughter delivered a few colorful Intel ones.

"I just had to call *The Post* and share Arlene's story," Dougherty said.

"The funny part about this whole thing," Morrison said, laughing, "is that I use them then toss them out!"

"Even the real nice ones?" this reporter asked while visiting her and Dougherty in her neat, uncluttered apartment. This reporter imagined a hoarder with boxes and boxes of them stacked to the ceiling or a scrapbook full of them labeled with dates and locations. Morrison and Dougherty both laughed and smiled.

Arlene Morrison collects napkins but not for the reasons one would expect.
(Post photo by Erik Vidstrand)

"Nope," she said. "I've been downsizing for years and don't need more stuff!"

Morrison is moving to an assisted living facility in Raleigh Hills in a few months and Dougherty plans on visiting her and, yes, collecting more napkins.

To use, of course!

"This is what it means to age-in-place," Dougherty said.

He explained how he helps get her mail each day and if a letter comes from Alabama, they sit down to enjoy the contents together knowing a napkin may be inside.

Although Morrison didn't show it, moving from one's home to an assisted living facility is an emotional issue. A loss of independence comes with that as well as the community structure one is used to.

"This is what we are hoping to address once the Rivers West Village concept is up and running hopefully," Dougherty explained. "We want people to stay in their own homes as long as possible without the disruption of community, friends, neighbors."

Dougherty suspected that the facility Morrison is moving into would probably have linen napkins.

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