

Knapp: Aging in place: Safe and Sound

By Guest column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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Over this past year I had a few small health problems — nothing big, but enough to nudge me (unwillingly) into understanding a bit better what it means not to feel as “safe and sound” as I used to. The first incident — a fall — left me aware of how my health status could change in a matter of seconds. I didn’t sustain any injuries, but was told that I should take it easy and not drive for a week. I tried to follow these instructions, but lasted only three days without driving. Even though I knew that my doctor was right, I couldn’t follow through on the advice. I hated the feeling of not being able to resume my normal life.

The second incident was minor surgery that required some recovery time. “Four to six weeks to heal,” they said. I didn’t believe them: a few weeks; I’m a fast healer; I know my body — they don’t! I was wrong. It took more than six weeks and I felt fatigued and out of sorts for much of that time. During those unreal, drowsy days, I spent a lot of time listening to the radio, watching stupid television and, jolted by my unexpected vulnerability, doing some thinking about safety and soundness.

“Safe and sound,” according to dictionary definitions, means free from danger or injury. In the past, I used the term and felt relief when my kids and grandkids arrived to their destination after being in a big rainstorm, or when my son made it back from a remote Alaskan island. They are back home safe and sound, whew! I don’t need to think about it anymore. It’s over.

Although the episodes that impacted my health and well-being are pretty much behind me, they are not really over in my psyche. Unlike the relief I feel when my family is OK after a scary time, I can’t feel total freedom from worry because, in my deepest self, I know I am slowly getting older and perhaps more vulnerable. This doesn’t stop me from plowing along with my life, but I am somehow changed. I am a bit more cautious, more aware of my own breakability, and definitely more reflective about what it means when safety and soundness is threatened.

As I thought about it, I began to realize that, like everything else, being “safe” and “sound” is very complex and has different meanings and responses depending on whom you talk to. I know a bit about what the Department of Senior Services offers: health and fitness classes, bridge, arts, and discussion to keep us physically and mentally “sound,” and social services and outreach to keep us “safe.” To learn more, I had a conversation with the Newton Police Elder Affairs liaison, Eric Rosenbaum. Officer Rosenbaum is a young man, with a young family, and a Newton native. He told me at length about his approach in protecting the health and safety of older Newton residents.

“I work on a number of things that impact elders such as scams, alerting people about crime risks in their homes and neighborhoods, and domestic violence. I make presentations about these issues,” he said.

Mostly, he follows up on calls about: falling; dementia in a family member or neighbor; or health risks through hoarding. He carefully makes sure that callers are connected to the appropriate people in the community for assistance. Officer Rosenbaum explained that he is a part of an unseen network of people from Newton agencies that meet on a regular basis to discuss and find ways to improve what they do in order to protect residents.

Other people held this position before Officer Rosenbaum took over less than a year ago but he is not new to helping seniors. When I asked him why he took on this responsibility, he answered quite simply.

“My grandmother lived with us. It was part of my life growing up.”

His mom works at Hebrew Rehabilitation Center and he volunteered at the old Recuperative Center. It goes back to my grandparents,” he said. “I don’t want anyone to take advantage of older people. It is very rewarding to make peoples’ lives less stressful.”

As I listened to him and watched him, I was touched by his competence, thoughtfulness and compassion. How lucky we are, I thought, to have him and all the others in Newton who worry about us but who are careful not to interfere with our independence and privacy.

My learnings from Officer Rosenbaum were that, first, there are wonderful people out there thinking about our well-being; second, we should not be afraid or embarrassed to call them for help; and finally that we that we are all in this aging in place business together – we just need to find each other. One phone call to Officer Rosenbaum (617-796-3660) or the Department of Senior Services (617-796-1660) will get you to someone who can ease your mind.

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and caregiver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia.” She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging

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