

VILLAGES OF KENSINGTON

By Jeffrey Steger

The Villages of Kensington (VoK) is an all-volunteer, non-profit neighborhood organization whose mission is to build a supportive, diverse, intergenerational network of neighbors helping neighbors to remain in their homes and stay engaged in the Kensington community.

Established in 2016, VoK has more than 80 members, with an average age of about 80, and more than 30 volunteers. VoK is dedicated to its members' well-being, functioning as a provider of services (such as rides to medical appointments) and as a social meeting hub. VoK arranges transportation, in-home assistance with chores, friendly visiting, and technology assistance to members as well as cordial, recreational, and educational opportunities.

In general, the Village Model recognizes the importance of community and choice for older adults. The National Village Movement comprises more than 300 Villages operating or in development throughout the country, each serving older adults in their communities.

During the period August 1, 2020, through July 31, 2021, VoK volunteers provided about 180 rides, the vast majority to and/or from medical appointments; ran nearly 70 errands, typically to pick up and deliver prescriptions; made scores of social calls (by phone during the pandemic); offered social and educational events via Zoom; and provided pet care in the form of dozens of walks.



During the pandemic, VoK created a truly intergenerational program to connect Montgomery County public school students with VoK members to participate in an oral personal history project. Montgomery County school students were matched with and interviewed VoK members, and then wrote up their personal histories, which were then posted on the VoK website. The students earned Student Service Learning credit while interviewing VoK members and writing their personal histories. This intergenerational program was a way to make connections during the pandemic and was a tremendous success. In October, VoK hosted a panel discussion on Zoom featuring a couple of VoK members who participated in the oral history project and several Montgomery County students who interviewed the VoK members and drafted their personal histories. (These histories are available on the VoK website at www.villagesofkensingtonmd.org/oral-histories.)

In mid-November 2021, VoK member, volunteer, and former Board member Laurie Pross, and her husband Jim, hosted a "Cider by the Fire Pit" at their home. It was a very pleasant social gathering around the hosts' outdoor fire pit attended by approximately 20 people and featuring drinks and tasty food.

In mid-December, VoK organized a trip to see and enjoy the holiday lights at Brookside Gardens, which was attended by nearly 20 members and volunteers. The weather was good, and attendees enjoyed the event. Later in the month, VoK organized a successful effort to write holiday notes and cards to VoK members and volunteers.

VoK was founded in 2016 by Kensington residents Donna Savage (a resident of Kensington Heights) and Suzanne Bowler (a resident of Rock Creek Hills). Savage and Bowler met in 2014 at an event sponsored by the Silver Spring Village. Savage indicated that she was inspired by what Silver Spring Village was doing – "supporting seniors to stay in their homes by using volunteers," and the Village concept was remarkably interesting to her. "It is the neighborly thing to do," said Savage. "Giving rides, taking garbage to the curb. This was already happening, so we decided to organize around the concept of neighbors helping neighbors." Savage became VoK's first president and served in that post until September 2019. Bowler served as VoK's vice president for several years.

Savage and Bowler started meeting with a small group from the Rock Creek Hills neighborhood and they decided to move forward to create a Village. The group did an online survey of residents in Kensington Heights



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and Rock Creek Hills to determine what services people wanted and whether individuals would volunteer to provide the proposed services. Savage said they received a fairly robust response. The survey showed that people were interested in the proposed services and there would be an adequate number of volunteers.

Based on word of mouth, residents of other neighborhoods in 20895 learned of these initial efforts, and ultimately the group including Savage and Bowler decided to expand the initial organization to cover all of 20895 and a few adjacent streets (where neighborhood civic associations cross 20895 into adjacent zip codes). The Village idea was coming to fruition.

Savage said that Pazit Aviv, Montgomery County's Village Coordinator, has been a "wonderful resource" over the years. Savage said that "in addition to meeting with the initial Board to share her expertise on forming and administering a non-profit village, Pazit has always been a resource for VoK" including sharing ideas on how to recruit more volunteers.

Savage said that in early 2016, VoK participated in a grant received by the Jewish Council for the Aging (JCA) Village Rides program. Providing rides to seniors was the largest initial service VoK offered, and JCA's Village Rides provided the infrastructure for receiving calls requesting rides and arranging for rides by volunteers. JCA Village Rides' grant also provided seed money to pay for VoK's non-profit registration and printing of brochures and provided training to new VoK volunteers.

According to Savage, in addition to providing rides, initial services included friendly visits to members, a "daily call" in the morning to check in on a member, in-home services such as changing light bulbs in difficult to reach places, yard and gardening help, and pet services. Charter members in the first half of 2016 numbered about 30. The number of members has grown to more than 80.



Savage said that "The Greater Kensington area is a wonderful place to live because VoK is here." She said the Village concept remains remarkably interesting to her and that she "wants to stay in her house forever," and that organizations like VoK can help individuals live in their communities longer than they might otherwise be able.

In September 2019, Kensington resident and VoK volunteer Mike Landa became VoK's second President, and he continues to serve in that role. Mike and his wife Michele and their son Adam have lived in Kensington since 1992. Landa began volunteering with VoK in spring 2017, joined the Board in early 2018, and took the position of Volunteer Coordinator in spring 2018. Landa retired in 2015 from a career that included two tours in the practice of food and drug law in government, with a hiatus of seven years in private practice, and finished with stints in leadership and management in the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

As VoK's President, Landa chairs Board meetings, provides Montgomery County with reports

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under the contract VoK has with the County, engages with other Villages and organizations that partner with VoK, and handles inquiries to VoK. In addition, in his role as Volunteer Coordinator, Landa receives requests for assistance from VoK, posts those requests for volunteers to fill, and recruits new volunteers.

Kensington residents Jennifer Kerns Ivory serves as VoK's Vice President, Tamara Rickman serves as VoK's Treasurer and Sharon Paver serves as VoK's Secretary and onboards non-driver new volunteers. The VoK Board also includes Louis Tenenbaum, Jeffrey Steger, Marilyn Emery and Judie Walters. The Board meets monthly to discuss programming and services and consider ways to best serve its members and promote its offerings.

Landa has served as VoK's President during the pandemic. As requests for rides dropped, volunteers performed some different services such as shopping for or with VoK members and picking up prescriptions. In general, though, Landa said, the pandemic has resulted in a reduction in the number of rides requested and the number of in-person social events.

Nonetheless, VoK has offered programs over Zoom, including a game show modeled on What's My Line; a Conversation with Christina M. Puchalski, MD, Director, George Washington University Institute for Spirituality and Health; a discussion focused on Safe and Accessible Home Solutions; and a panel discussion featuring participants in VoK's intergenerational personal history project.

"I continue to think that our most significant service is providing rides. For some people, this is extremely important. They do not have cars and do not have family nearby, which means they would need to use a cab or Uber or public transportation. For some people, the trips would be exceptionally long and difficult or really taxing on their budgets."

During a recent snowstorm, Landa circulated a list of snow shovelers, and a VoK couple (in their 80's and 90's) used the list to find someone to shovel their long driveway.

One of VoK's volunteers has become the "go-to person" for a couple in their 90's. They have lived in their own home for more than half a century but no longer drive and count on this volunteer to take them to medical appointments, pick up prescriptions, do some food shopping, and run the occasional errand.



Another volunteer assisted a VoK member in transitioning from his own apartment to communal living. The VoK volunteer still takes the member to occasional outside medical appointments in the area.

In December, VoK received an email from a VoK member who recently moved from Kensington to a neighborhood close by. Over a period of several years, some 15 VoK volunteers provided this VoK member with scores of rides to a variety of medical, laboratory, and physical therapy appointments. In her email, the VoK member said "Thanks and More Thanks! Your presence in my life has been decisive to me. I'm very grateful and I feel a deep sentiment of appreciation to you and the volunteers. I'm speechless. I'll remember your kindness and help forever."

VoK works with Montgomery County's Aging and Disabilities Services office. VoK is funded in part by membership dues (including reduced fees based on income and is free to members who are 90 years of age and older) and by a contract from Montgomery County.

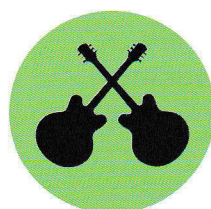
Over the last few years, VoK has also worked with Steve Gurney, the Founder/Publisher of Positive Aging Sourcebook. Among other things, Gurney has assisted VoK by helping to revamp the organization's website and coordinating some Zoom sessions during the pandemic.

VoK is also a member of the Washington Area Village Exchange (WAVE). WAVE is a forum through which nonprofit Villages, such as VoK, in the Washington, D.C. metro area share experiences and ideas. WAVE works with senior-serving and intergenerational organizations and agencies and encourages the growth and improvement of the Villages movement in the Washington, D.C. area. Kensington resident and former VoK Board member Laurie Pross currently serves on WAVE's Board.

As a longtime resident of Kensington and VoK's President, Landa is proud of VoK's mission, and the services provided. "We are really about neighbors helping neighbors and making it possible for individuals to remain in their homes and stay engaged in their community."

Next month, Kensington Neighbors will include an article on the VoK's Creating Personal Histories of Kensington Residents, including excerpts from some of the oral history projects.

To find out more about VoK, please visit the organization's website at www.villagesofkensingtonmd.org.



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