

## **More Than Age podcast**

Joining us today is **Karen Fuller**. Karen is a retired nurse, community volunteer, and the driving force behind a new initiative called Solo Seniors, and so much more. Welcome, Karen.

**Karen**

Thank you, Anne. Appreciate being here.

**Anne**

Karen, could you start by telling us what Solo Seniors is all about?

**Karen**

Well, solo seniors is a grassroots initiative that we started out looking at some of the issues that are confronting seniors living alone in the county.

We just came up with an idea of going out and seeing what people... what their needs were. And, so we looked at volunteers, and we had 10 compassionate volunteers come forward, and we started having meetings throughout the County, and... to try to find out what... how people identified their needs, and what they felt they were lacking, or what they needed to support their living alone in the County.

And, out of that, we identified housing being a major issue, looking at different types of housing, you know, some of them living in their homes and, you know, couldn't afford to keep them up and maintain their homes.

So we looked at co-housing, we looked at shared housing. And we also looked at communal housing, and at alternative forms of housing. One of the initiatives that we struck our interest was Abbeyfield Homes. Abbeyfield Homes are small, non-profit, home-like, residential settings, where they're affordable for people, they're home-like, and people can stay in their communities.

So that was how we started. Another thing that we determined from our conversations was the need to plan. Because so many people are blindsided by life circumstances, and they're not prepared for, for living alone, and being confronted by some of the issues. So that really struck us, and so we decided that part of the initiative would be to provide a holistic approach to planning, like a workshop series of six parts, and we called it a *Roadmap to Aging Alone Successfully*, whatever success is for each individual. And, we found that that was a starting point to draw people, to gather together, to share the journey of aging alone, and find people that have like interests and so on within the group, and so many have formed friendships out of that group.

**Anne**

Wonderful. So, is it women and men in the group?

**Karen**

Yes, and surprisingly, at our last ones, we had two couples come. They asked if they could come to the group, and I was quite curious how, why they would want to choose to come to a Soto Seniors, and they were planning. And that really... they wanted to make sure that each other were prepared, knowing that it's an inevitable situation. One couple was... they were writing a book for each other. The husband was setting out everything to do around the house, and making sure, and the wife was doing likewise for the husband. And I was so impressed with their foresight and their care for each other to make sure that they were going to be fine on their own, you know, so it was really... that was a good...experience.

**Anne**

Oh, that's encouraging. And so, obviously, the word about your workshops and your group have been... the community is starting to be aware of the work that you're doing. So, Karen, will that work continue? You said that there was a series of workshops. Will there be more workshops?

**Karen**

Yes. Last year was our first full year. We got a municipal community grant to explore the needs of seniors living alone and looking at housing, and the Andrew was was our major sponsor. And, so we held the workshops there to start out with, but this year, we decided to really build on our partnership with Community Care for Seniors. And I think their reach of their newsletter that goes out to over 2,000 people, I think that really made people more aware of what was going on. So, we're probably going to continue to have the workshops at the new County Seniors' Centre, or other community centres within the County.

**Anne**

Oh, that's really good news. So, Karen, what inspired you to start this group? You mentioned how that got started, but was there certain inspiration, or were you seeing a need in our community?

**Karen**

Yes. I think, well, I am a widow myself, I've been a widow for 10 years. And, 7 years ago, I moved to the County. My daughter and her family lived here. So I moved, and I realized that, you know, you have to make your way. You have to get out into the community and meet people. You can't rely totally on your family.

And in my circle of friends, I was finding more and more where, either their husbands were going into long-term care, or, they had lost their husbands. A couple of seniors in the building. I live in an apartment building in the County, and a couple of seniors in my building, because of losing their spouses could not afford to keep up with their overhead expenses. And the waiting list for subsidized housing, affordable housing, is so long in the County. And they were really struggling, you know, times without insurance on their cars, and so on because they had to set priorities. And, so I thought, there's got to be a need. And, so I looked at the Vital Signs demographics and I thought, my goodness, there's over 3,000 people living alone in the County. So I really thought that there was a need.

And I have experience in long-term care. My background is long-term care, so that prompt

### **Anne**

I'm so glad that you did take that action, and obviously it's having an impact.

So, Abbeyfield Homes, Prince Edward County, I see that you've been able to start on that. What's the status on that? Can you tell me just a little bit more about the local aspect of that?

### **Karen**

Abbeyfield has always been sort of a pet project. They started in Britain for the reason of seniors living alone and being isolated. And, and they've moved to Canada. They're across Europe. They've been in 40 years in Canada. So the fact that they are affordable, they're small, they're intimate, you're looking at 12 to 15 residents with their own rooms, and ensuite bath, and communal dining, and sitting areas. And so we looked at when the housing issue was top of mind for a lot of the people we talked to, we got in touch with Abbeyfield. So we had to do a community survey, which we did to see whether there was an interest. We did 100 surveys, and it certainly came out very positive for the need for such an initiative in the County.

So we worked towards getting our provisional license for Abbeyfield Homes. Abbeyfield Canada is the umbrella organization, and you get a provisional license, and then you have 12 months to be incorporated as a non-profit. And then 18 months to be incorporated as a charitable organization. So we're in the process of doing that. We've set up a board. We're still looking for board members, so if any of our listeners at all are interested in helping out with this initiative, we would really appreciate. But that seemed to be, that along with shared housing and co-housing, both of those were very much in the forefront, and when we were talking with people.

**Anne**

Karen, if someone is interested in learning more about Abbeyfield Homes, Prince Edward County, or looking at becoming a board member, how would they find the information ?

**Karen**

There is a website, it is, [Abbeyfieldprinceedwardcounty.ca](http://Abbeyfieldprinceedwardcounty.ca).

**Anne**

Perfect, thank you.

**Karen**

The direction Abbeyfield Homes is taking for any new development is being embedded in an existing senior's, development. So they're working on one in the Providence House in Kingston right now, Providence Village. They're going to be looking a redevelopment right now. There's one in Kitchener that's in a high-rise building, with one floor being, Abbeyfield. So we're s going to be meeting with Pinecrest Housing to see if there's an opportunity to work together in partnership, and see, what's ahead and if there's any opportunity to work together with that.

**Anne**

For listeners who may not be familiar with Pinecrest, maybe just give a little more background?

**Karen**

Pinecrest was a school in Bloomfield, that was purchased, by a non-profit group with the idea of making it into seniors' apartments and community centre where they would have various opportunities for people to gather and so on. And it's been a long time in coming, because they were running into problems with getting, central mortgage and housing funding. I know that the municipality went to Central Mortgage and Housing to try to see what the issues were, and they finally, I think there was a point system that we in the County were not recognized. So that we were losing our eligibility for competing for the money and so on. So that has been addressed.

And, Pinecrest is ready. In fact, I think they're working, with Thrive PEC, looking at community enrichment, what the community needs to make it a viable proposition. So, it's very exciting.

**Anne**

Hopefully we'll see some faster progress on that. It's very much needed.

**Anne**

So, Karen, you've had a nursing career. You and I have had a bit of a chance to talk about that, but your nursing career and life experiences, how has that shaped the work that you're doing today?

**Karen**

Well, I worked for 32 years as a registered nurse, and my first half of my career, I was working intensive care, coronary care, critical care. Then I moved because of the high stress in critical care, I moved into long-term care management. And, I was there for 17 years. So, I worked at several nursing homes within the same company. My last nursing home was in a rural community, much like Picton. And, 80 residents, much like McFarland Home. And, I just found it was family. There were so many residents and I learned so much from them. It wasn't just that we were caring for them, they were caring for us, for sure, as staff. But I think the most pronounced thing for me in the long-term care was when a spouse... when their decision has to be made that one... one partner goes in to long-term care. And, I saw that because I would have to meet them at the beginning, take them on tours, and meet them at the beginning, and go through the transition. And so many times the impact on the spouse that was left in the community, and most of the time it was the wife because half the income goes to long-term care. So people that had been married 50, 60 years, were separated from each other. The one remaining in the community had dramatic changes. Many of them had to sell their houses, they couldn't afford to keep them on the present income. It was so disruptive for them, and then they have to discover a new life for themselves. Many, many tears were shared, going through that, and, and so that's always been a passion of mine to support those people, the caregiver. They've been caring for somebody, and many of our solo seniors have been caring for family or partner for so long, and then all of a sudden, they have to pick all the pieces up together and make a life for themselves, and it's very, very difficult.

So that why, from my professional background, to give people the tools and, help them to learn how to build support systems for themselves, and rediscover who they are. Because you've been giving for so long that, many times finding out what's important to you in life, is, is really, predominant, I think, in order to find out what path you need to take to move forward.

**Anne**

So, Solo Seniors, really serves a lot of those needs.

Has there been anything that surprised you since launching Solo Seniors?

**Karen**

Well, I'm relatively new to the County, but I guess it's the perception, the divisions within the County. And, you know, we encourage people to join the Seniors Active Living Programs at the County Seniors' Centre and people say, oh, I don't go to Picton. Why would I want to go to Picton? So it's for people to realize that sometimes there have to be changes, and they have to adapt to a way of thinking, and a new life. And sometimes it's not easy. We talked about values in our workshop series and the gaps in meeting those values, and those values being really looking to... and saying what's important to you as living alone in the later part of your life, and what gaps are not being filled? Where are the gaps? What are the needs that are not being filled? And sometimes that takes some hard decisions.

**Anne**

It would indeed. So, for listeners who would like to get more involved or learn more about Solo Seniors, what's the best way to do that?

**Karen**

Well, we're on the Andrew website, now called the Circle of Friends at [circleoffriendspicton.ca](http://circleoffriendspicton.ca). And on that, website, there's a tab called Participate on the drop-down menu, and Solo Seniors PEC is on there.

Okay, and I'll certainly include links to any of these resources.

**Karen**

That's wonderful. And we do have a monthly newsletter that goes out, and on that page, there's a place to sign up for the newsletter, and that keeps you abreast of anything that's going on within Solo Seniors.

**Anne**

It's a great newsletter. I subscribe to it and I'd certainly encourage other people to do the same.

**Karen**

Thank you.

**Anne**

Karen, is there anything else that you'd like to tell our audience?

**Karen**

I can't stress enough the, people, I think we've got a wonderful community. There is so much to do in this community. And each... each one of us comes with our gifts and our talents. And I think it's really important to recognize those and reach out, because being part of the community and being involved, either through volunteering or participating in the various groups that are going on in the County you build a network of support and people that have like interests. I think that's because when we said successful, successful aging, sometimes that requires rearranging things in your life, and, because you don't have a partner anymore, and many, many of us are in the position now that we're losing very close friends.

And, so to keep a wide circle of friends and support and interests, so that you can draw on those people to... both for socializing and... and for support.

**Anne**

That's good advice, and I can certainly relate to many of those things that you said.

So, Karen, can you share a fun or unexpected fact about you?

**Karen**

Well, this is about going out of my comfort zone, I guess. A year after my husband died, I decided I'm going to assert myself a little bit, and go through my fears a little bit. And it was my 50th, reunion for my nursing where I graduated in Sudbury. So I thought, we were campers and I'm going to camp by myself and do the national parks on my way up. And it was funny, because I got a smaller tent and I practiced putting it up in my living room, so that I wouldn't make a fool of myself on the campground. And I stopped at all the national parks, and the most wonderful thing was when I took the MS Chi-Cheemau across to Manitoulin Island. And there was a bluegrass festival going on. So I joined the crowd here, I was by myself, and that was my fear of feeling isolated and alone. But there were so many people enjoying the bluegrass music and people were wonderful at the campsites. They included me in their campfires at night. They carted water for me, and the animals shared many of my meals, mainly the red squirrels. So that's something that I was very proud of myself for accomplishing that.

**Anne**

What the listeners can't see is how hard I am laughing here in the background. I love that story. That is brave ... very brave. Thanks for sharing.

**Anne**

So, we hope that you've enjoyed today's podcast episode of *More Than Age* with our guest, Karen Fuller. Thank you, Karen, for your time today.

**Karen**

Thank you, Anne. I really appreciate being here. It's a wonderful thing you're doing. Thank you.

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