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The Dynamics of Aging and Our Communities

Mission Statement

CCQ is an electronic and print public policy quarterly dedicated to looking at the aging segment of our society and region as it redefines itself and intersects with a wide cross section of demographic, social, cultural and economic features of society. In this light, we will consider subjects such as city and town planning, environmental advocacy, economic development, housing, work force, education, mobility, regionalism, governance, marketing, recreation, health care, social services, creativity, demographics, emerging technologies and the roles of nonprofit organizations. Our audience is public and private decision makers and all others seeking to understand a changing society. We will offer concise, thoughtful and interesting articles. Comments, including letters to the editor and recommendations from our readers, are welcome.

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What Just Happened?

Late summer of 2011 has been as dynamic a period in our history as we have experienced in quite some time. A national debate on our debt ceiling created an opportunity for many seniors to wonder whether they were going to receive their Social Security check in August. Then, a wildly unpredictable stock market proved why brokerage ads include the disclaimer that past results are not indicative of future performance. Retirees and soon to be retirees watched the value of their portfolios enter an out-of-control elevator that went up and down with unnerving forcefulness. Politicians looked at the calendar and realized that with only fifteen months remaining before the 2012 presidential election, they had best “kick the tires and light the fires” (apologies to Top Gun movie aficionados). Once again, the politicians have begun to tell us that government needs to be bigger or smaller or kinder or harsher.

Let’s consider what just happened.

The debt ceiling debate caught many by surprise. Seniors that I know weren’t paying any attention to what has traditionally been a procedural event until someone asked if Social Security checks would be mailed out at the beginning of August. Suddenly, many more people became interested in the debt ceiling debate. The stock market, responding to the quality of the debt ceiling debate (I’ll let you assign a value), showed great uncertainty. Pundits quickly pointed out that the market’s fluctuations were as much driven by issues associated with the financial climate of Europe and not caused by the debt ceiling debate. Many seniors were unimpressed with that explanation. Rating services watched the debt ceiling debate unfold and threatened to downgrade the quality of United States’ debt. Many news articles implied that a rating downgrade was inevitable, but I think plenty of people felt that it would not actually occur. When it did, I felt disheartened and I suspect many others felt the same way. Oddly, immediately following the downgrading of U.S. debt, foreign markets responded by investing heavily in U.S. debt.

These events have fueled an additional cry for government reform. Some people believe that our future financial security can only be assured if Social Security and Medicare are modified. Others hearing these proposals fear that these programs could become unrecognizable in a few years. And others are fighting vigorously to ensure that these programs remain solvent and work as they were originally intended.

For those of us who work in the area of aging services, it’s easy to feel confused and uncertain. For seniors living on fixed incomes, it’s easy to feel less secure than they felt a few years earlier. For younger citizens, it’s easy to feel pessimistic about their future wondering if the social safety nets that benefit their grandparents will be there when they become old. For adults not quite ready to retire, it’s easy to wonder if they should ever stop working. If Social Security and Medicare
are altered as some have suggested, will middle-agers feel they have enough money to retire as planned and live the way they expected to live?

What happened in late summer of 2011 is something that has happened many times in our past. Political disagreement and financial volatility were present at the founding of our nation and are present today. What is different today is how we are being bombarded by so many messages from so many sources. Twenty-four-hour cable news, smart-phones, and other technologies keep us immersed in issues surrounding Social Security and Medicare in a manner previous generations did not experience.

What can we do? We can make every effort to better understand how these programs are financed and how they operate. We need to better understand what the national debt ceiling is and we must be able to balance future concerns with today’s realities. Intergenerational conflict can be avoided if we understand how debt can be used as an effective tool of growth for everyone. We need to understand what rating agencies do and why they can have such an enormous impact on our lives. We can’t let our emotions and fears drive our national behavior. We need to become more educated about how government and programs function.

I will end with this question: If our future is in jeopardy, as some have suggested, why did foreign money flock to U.S. government securities after the recent downgrade? I believe the answer to this question is because the United States is still seen as the most stable and secure country in the world. I share their faith in the future of our country. Do you?

Rick Iannello
Executive Director
Albany Guardian Society
Update On a Couple of Former CCQ Writers

“I am not too old” declared Anne Decker, personal essayist in the April 2011 issue of CCQ. “Yes, I Can” was the title of her essay. I am pleased to write that Anne, the former pharmacist and mother of four children whose husband is in a nursing home, did get her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in Writing and Literature from Bennington College.

Bennington College does not formally give “highest honors,” but it appeared Anne was the head of the class. She led the parade of grads, got a standing ovation when she got her degree, and was elected to be the student speaker at the graduation dinner. Anne’s three grandchildren attended the dinner and according to Anne, “their jaws dropped when I was introduced and marched up to the podium.”

What next? Anne is working on a book about her fifty-three years of marriage titled Happily Ever After. She is also planning with members of her MFA class to do a coast-to-coast reading tour. Hopefully, from time to time, I will be able to get her to write a personal essay for CCQ.

Robert J. Kafin wrote about “Looking at Life as a Set of Sequential Episodes” in the October 2008 issue of CCQ. One of the alternatives Robert suggested for the person whose career is coming to an end was to “take a different road.”

Anne has done that by fulfilling her dream of becoming a writer. Robert, who has scaled down as an active partner in a 750-attorney firm in New York City where he had been chief operating partner, has followed two of the alternatives he suggested in CCQ. Robert and his wife Carol have taken a different road by opening the Bolton Gallery and Art Center on the main street in Bolton Landing. Robert has also followed his suggestion of “Keep on truckin’” whereby professionals keep doing what they have been doing in their careers but “at a different pace, or in a different place.” Robert moved beyond leading a major New York City law firm. He is now using his legal and administrative skills chairing GrowNYC, an organization that operates 53 farmers’ markets. He wants to help the growth of the local food movement by having organic farming help revitalize rural communities.

You can find Anne’s essays and Robert’s advice by looking for back issues of CCQ at www.albanyguardiansociety.org. If you have a story to tell in essay form like Anne or advice like Robert provided, please send to us at CCQ.

This issue of CCQ seeks to be informative. Our feature location is the historic Stockade section of Schenectady which is an urban community at its best. If you don’t know the Stockade, this feature with its great pictures should inspire you to visit there. If you do know the Stockade, you should be able to learn more about how engaged the Stockaders are in their own community.
Pickleball is only ten years old in our area, but as Marilyn DuBois, a devoted pickleball player tells us, it is a great and growing sport for all, including seniors, who want to stay active and participate in a community of enthusiasts.

Serving the needs of the expanding aging population of Albany is a growing activity, and Jane Schramm, Executive Director of Senior Services of Albany, tells us the many services provided to allow elders to age in place in the comfort of their homes in Albany.

Not all seniors, like Anne Decker and Robert Kafin, are self-motivated and many suffer from depression and have thoughts of suicide. Dr. Joseph Hunter at the VA Medical Center has helped seniors with thoughts of suicide discover a life-affirming hidden interest, for example, in writing.

Personal essayist Bob Herman, who is in his ninth decade, shares his thoughts on Twitter, Facebook, GPS, and other challenges the over fifty-year-olds have to deal with in the new digital world. Bob may still be struggling with the cordless telephone, but he has a great sense of humor and is sharp as a tack in chronicling the world around us.

Our Guest Columnist in this issue is Congressman Paul Tonko who over many years in the State Legislature and now in the U.S. Congress has been a passionate advocate for our region and the welfare of its residents.

Paul M. Bray is an Albany attorney who is a lecturer in planning at the University of Albany, a columnist and founding President of the Albany Roundtable civic lunch forum. His e-mail address is pmbray@aol.com.
Schenectady Stockade

By Robert Briber

The Stockade in Schenectady started life in 1661 as a small Dutch fur-trading community, part of the Dutch colony of New Netherland. A most important historical event for the Stockade happened later that century, as part of hostilities between the British and the French. In 1690, French militia and their Indian allies attacked the residents of the Stockade, an enclosure built to protect the settlers, but with a gate left open. The attackers killed 62 residents and captured many more.

Later, history records another calamity, in 1819, when a major fire destroyed boat building businesses that bounded the Mohawk River. Town fathers, however, knew the Erie Canal was being built and was to open in a few years. Commerce moved uptown to be near the Canal and left the residential area behind. Thus by the benign result of a fire and a new canal, our Stockade has become the oldest continuously occupied neighborhood in the country.

The Stockade still possesses the largest collection of authentic colonial houses of any neighborhood in the United States. It is New York’s first-named historic district, designated as such in 1973. It features many fine Victorian, Federal, and Georgian style houses in a continuum of architectural styles. The oldest home dates to 1740; another was the home of the first governor of New York State. It is a rich and rewarding neighborhood for anyone interested in living among historic surroundings.

Not long ago, Schenectady was a rust belt city that saw its employment base move away and factories empty. Now, though, both it and the residential Stockade offer much more than a rich history. Evidence of recovery from the doldrums of the recent past is only one of the attractions. The city shows many signs of revival including new business activity, Proctors Theater, political vigor, new buildings, repaired streets, and other benefits.
“Thus by the benign result of a fire and a new canal, our Stockade has become the oldest continuously occupied neighborhood in the country.”

The Stockade has become an interesting and healthy community of loyal home-owners, young professionals, retirees, artists, and urbanites. There are many opportunities here for companionship among such folk as these:

- **Home owners** who enjoy a historic neighborhood and share with others a determination to protect the historic value of the homes;
- **Thespians** who want amateur theater—both the Schenectady Civic Players and the neighboring Schenectady Light Opera Company have offered more than eighty years of quality theatrical productions to local audiences, musicians, and actors;
- **Nature lovers** who enjoy seeing the seasons change on the panorama of the beautiful river;
- **Folks** who like biking, running or exercising along the banks of the Mohawk River, or who like to see their children play in our parks;
- **Restaurant goers** who like choice among small cafes, ethnic settings, pubs, up-scale “white-tablecloth” restaurants, and other venues within easy reach;
- **Book clubs; neighborhood watch groups; swimmers; sailors; and many others.**

Stockaders, as Stockade residents are called, have easy access to a complete downtown with restaurants, shopping, a six-screen movie house, and a large and beautiful professional theater that shows popular Broadway shows and other entertaining events frequently—almost every evening.

Stockade residents have created a neighborhood that also includes, among other things: a first-rate historical society; an active and effective neighborhood association with its own newspaper; a lovely riverfront park with tennis courts, gardens, and a children’s playground; and three churches with their own rich histories, including one that housed American troops for one hundred years to prevent another 1690s-style attack.

A list of events taken from a recent “Stockade SPY” newspaper hints at the vigor of the neighborhood. Events are listed here in chronological order and while they may change in focus from year to year, they are representative of our activity:
• **Spring Clean-Up Day**, a day to join together to clean up the park and some of the grounds common to all Stockaders.

• **General Membership Meetings** of members of the Stockade Association are held every other month. The group has been addressed by mayors and other civic leaders. The Board of the Stockade Association meets every month. Both groups offer opportunity for participation by interested residents.

• **Neighborhood Sidewalk Sale** where we sell our excess stuff to visitors (and sometimes to each other.)

• **Meet and Greet Nights**, to network and socialize with neighbors. These are held frequently.

• **Secret Garden Tour**, an opportunity to see the beautiful gardens hidden behind sedate house frontages.

• **Park Summer Picnic**, another opportunity to network and meet with neighbors.

• **The Stockade Villagers Outdoor Art Show**, an event that over its fifty years has brought hundreds of artists and thousands of visitors to enjoy and buy or sell their art.

• **The “Soiree,”** a more formal evening of dining, fellowship and music, with dancing.

• **“A Walk Through History,”** a colorful reenactment, the day brings actors to represent famous people in local history as part of informative and family-oriented neighborhood tours.

• **Annual Christmas Tree Lighting**, with caroling around the statue of “the Indian,” the statue of an American Indian who helped the residents of the early settlement. A potluck social hour follows.

“The Stockade has become an interesting and healthy community of loyal home-owners, young professionals, retirees, artists, and urbanites.”

Come check us out! The Stockade is a residential community and special place that offers a great deal to new residents.

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Robert Briber was Director of the Hudson Mohawk Association of Colleges and Universities and was very active with the former Albany League of Arts. Before becoming a Stockader, he lived in the Center Square neighborhood of Albany so he has experience in two of the best urban neighborhoods in this region.
Pickleball: A Game for Everyone!

By Marilyn Murphy DuBois

What is pickleball?
Never heard of the sport? Well, it has the attention of hundreds of folks in the Capital District. The sport evolved in the State of Washington in 1965 and became a useful tool for teaching kids tennis skills without the larger court and racket. Many schools in New York State teach pickleball and other paddle/racket sports as part of their physical education curriculum.

Pickleball is played on a court similar in size to a badminton doubles court (20 feet by 44 feet) with a 34 inch high net and court layout similar to tennis. The court has a 7-foot “no-volley” zone on both sides of the net. Play is similar to tennis, except that the serve is underhand. Serve alternately rotates from the right to left side of the court and points are scored only by the serving side. A game is generally played to eleven points, winning by at least two. A short handled paddle and a hard plastic waffle ball are all it takes to get started.

Pickleball in the Capital District Region and beyond
Karl Depold joined with Alice and Dave Tatro to bring pickleball to Collins Park in Scotia about ten years ago. Dave and Karl were also instrumental in getting pickleball incorporated into the Empire State Senior Games held at SUNY Cortland, first as a demonstration sport in 2003 and as a recognized competition sport in the Games the following year. Players from the Capital District have dominated the competition at the Games, winning many medals in all categories (39 medals this year) and expanding play to other regions of the State.

Today pickleball thrives nationally and internationally and is a sport included in many state Senior Games, as well as national and international competitions. If you travel around the U.S., you will find pickleball in almost every state, particularly in “snowbird” states like Florida, Texas, and Arizona. Vacation spots like the Villages in Florida feature more than 100 pickleball courts in addition to many other sport opportunities.

Most importantly, pickleball can be played by all ages and skill levels. Chances are that you probably know someone who is already playing pickleball—it’s that popular!

Where to play pickleball
Players in the Capital District can access our website, www.cdpickleball.com, which features many of the venues available for play, tournaments, and playing tips from some of the top players in the area. There are currently more than 19 locations, indoor and out, in the Capital District. You can play pickleball every day of the week somewhere! Some venues have extra paddles that you can try out. Like tennis, singles, mixed, and men’s/women’s doubles are all played.

Wondering how to get started? Using the above website, you can get information about equipment for sale locally. In addition, there are several websites that sell paddles, balls, nets, etc. (e.g., www.
pickleballstuff.com. run by our friends Fran and Barney Myers from Washington State). Just Google “pickleball” and you will be amazed at what turns up, so you can comparison shop. If you’re unsure what type of paddle to get, try out several from other players.

There are also websites for the national organization, the USA Pickleball Association (www.usapa.org), and the World Pickleball Federation, (www.worldpickleball.com), that contain a lot of information on play at those levels.

“Today pickleball thrives nationally and internationally and is a sport included in many state Senior Games, as well as national and international competitions.”

Who can play pickleball?
Anyone! If you are looking for some exercise from easy to aggressive, just stop by one of the venues. Newcomers will generally be helped by more experienced players and you can find a location that suits your level of play. Players with tennis, racquetball, or table tennis skills should readily pick up the game and progress quickly.

As you improve, you may want to participate in some of the local tournaments. Annual events are sponsored by the Greater Glenville Family YMCA and the Duanesburg Area Community Center, both in Schenectady County.

Keeping the Empire State Senior Games alive
Budget cuts have affected all State agencies and the Empire State Senior Games were no exception. Threatened with cancellation in 2010, Assemblyman Steve Englebright from Setauket worked tirelessly to successfully reinstate the Games last year. This year the Cortland Regional Sports Council took up the slack and sponsored the Games in June. Nevertheless, the future of the Games remains unclear.

Keeping pickleball alive in this region will depend on the enthusiasm and loyalty of the players. Remember, it’s all about having fun and staying fit. To quote Fran and Barney, “The most wasted of all days is one without laughter—on the pickleball court!” Come join us and brighten your days.

Marilyn Murphy DuBois has been enthusiastically playing pickleball since 2002, competing with partner Karl Depold in the Senior Games for five years until his untimely death in 2008. Marilyn continued Karl’s weekly pickleball updates for two years. Now all of that information is incorporated into the Capital District Pickleball website.
Senior Services of Albany
By Jane Schramm

To some, we are the friendly face delivering a hot meal and a kind word. To others, we are the transportation that gets them to and from their doctors’ offices. To others, we are the wise counsel that guides them through the intricacies of the health insurance system or introduces them to realities of the world of caregiving for their loved ones. Some know us via our social adult day care that offers caregivers well-deserved respite and where they know that their loved ones are safe, secure, and well-attended to under the care of dedicated, trained professionals. And yet to others, we are the face of the local senior centers where they enjoy dining with their friends, participating in programs and classes that enrich their spirit, mind, and body, and call these Centers their second home.

Senior Services of Albany has many faces. It always has. It is a multi-faceted not-for-profit organization that for over fifty-nine years has provided and continues to provide a menu of aging services to our elderly, their families and caregivers offering choice, independence, and dignity. Our services allow our elders to age in place in the comfort of their own homes.

“Excitement fills the air at the new Administrative Offices at 32 Essex Street in Albany, as the staff embraces the many changes that have taken place.”

History—how it all began
In 1952, The League of Jewish Women and the Junior League of Albany, in order to meet the needs of older adults in the community, created and began Senior Services of Albany as a not-for-profit organization specifically designed to help fill these needs. The agency has continued to evolve over the course of its history growing from an agency that enriches the lives of older adults to one that is continually changing with the needs of the community to offer a wide range of comprehensive services. These services include but are not limited to: multiple senior program sites that offer programs and/or senior community dining; transportation; a social adult day care program; case management services for older adults; health and wellness programs; caregiver support programs to assist those who are helping elders age gracefully; and Meals on Wheels home delivered meals.

In 1986, Senior Services of Albany responded to a request from Albany County to assume the operation of the largest portion of the County’s home delivered meal program. Senior Services
continued to identify the needs of the community and expanded the program to all areas of the County, with the exception of the Villages of Maplewood, Green Island, and Ravena. Senior Services also partnered with the Visiting Nurses Association and the Eddy throughout the Capital Region as subcontractors providing meals to many of their clientele. This home delivered meal program grew from a mere 200 meals per day to approximately 1,000 per day. In 2010 alone, Senior Services prepared and delivered 300,000 hot and cold, home delivered meals to homebound elderly and disabled clients. This year Senior Services' Meals on Wheels program proudly celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary.

But it doesn’t end there. Senior Services proudly leads the way in continually bringing timely, cutting edge aging programs and services to the community. More recently, our Community Care Services Department’s “Telephone Support Group” programming was nationally recognized and honored in 2010 as a winner of the National Family Caregiving Awards, sponsored by the National Alliance for Caregiving with support from the MetLife Foundation. This unique program, run by talented, professional staff, was recognized for its innovation, effectiveness, and response to caregiver needs in their communities.

In addition, Senior Services was chosen as one of three agencies in the state by New York State to work in partnership with the Albany County Department for Aging to launch the Senior Medicare Patrol (SMP) program aimed at reducing Medicare fraud. This particular program is funded by a grant from the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Administration on Aging.

Renaissance
As William Shakespeare once penned, “What is in a name, that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Senior Services of Albany, like a rose, is many things to many people yet it has often been recognized strictly for the one service facet that the public may know them by, be it Meals on Wheels, Community Caregiver Support Services, Senior Sunday Picnics in the Park, Grocery Shopping Assistance, or even a Senior Center. This can prove to be a challenge when an organization wears so many different hats. The organization however has experienced a type of rebirth or Renaissance. In March of 2011, due to circumstances beyond our control, Senior Services of Albany had to close its doors at the Louise Corning Senior Center at 25 Delaware Avenue in Albany. However, no matter where the agency is located, the mission has remained the same: “To foster independence and enhance the quality of life of older adults by providing innovative services and caregiver support.”
While the doors of the Louise Corning Center closed, others opened for the organization despite the fact that many thought that the closure of the Center also marked the end of the agency. Senior Services has a presence and satellite locations throughout the community. Excitement fills the air at the new Administrative Offices at 32 Essex Street in Albany, as the staff embraces the many changes that have taken place. Change is a necessary path on the road to growth, and although we cannot predict the future, the staff at Senior Services of Albany is dedicated to providing low-cost, high-quality programs and services to the older adults and their caregivers in the Capital Region, which truly enhance their quality of life and foster personal independence.

Senior Services of Albany operates a social adult day care facility called Newgate, which is housed out of the Bethany Reformed Church on New Scotland Avenue in Albany. The Nutrition Services and Meals on Wheels kitchen and offices are housed at 20 Rensselaer Street in Albany, in a building that is owned and managed by the Albany Housing Authority. Senior Services of Albany’s Community Care Services Department and Transportation Department are both housed in this space as well.

Senior Services proudly continues to provide many of the classes, programs, and services that were offered at the Louise Corning Center. Tai Chi, Wii bowling, chair caning, sewing, painting, and bingo are now held at the Westview Senior Center located at 680 Central Avenue. We also offer Tai Chi and dance classes at St. Sophia’s Greek Orthodox Church on Whitehall Road. In addition to these classes, senior dining for lunches and evening dinners is open to interested community members at the Westview and South Mall Towers Senior Centers.

Senior Services of Albany’s major program areas—Nutrition Services/Meals on Wheels, Transportation, and Community Care Services Department—are always available resources to older adults whether in Albany, or depending on the program, the Capital Region. The Meals on Wheels home delivered meal program provides essential nutrition and daily personal contact to hundreds of homebound elderly or disabled adults. The Transportation Services offer rides Monday through Friday for medical appointments, grocery shopping, trips to the mall, and even visits to family and friends. The Community Care Services Department provides essential information and support to elderly adults and their caregivers including a social adult day care, grocery shopping assistance, friendly home visits, counseling, case management, and a health insurance counseling and referral program (HICAP).
Senior Services is a firm supporter of enabling and assisting our elders to be able to age in place and reside in their own homes. To many, just receiving home delivered meals enables our elderly clientele to stay where they want to be. To shed more light on this program, it is important to convey that no senior adult sixty years of age or older, in need, is denied this service. In each case the home delivered meal is the same as other meals provided to hospital patients or community dining meal participants. Close to three-fourths of the recipients are over the age of seventy-five. Included in the number of those age 75-plus, are 34 percent over the age of eighty-five. Females represent almost two-thirds of the recipients. Half of the recipients will receive short-term service upon hospital discharge until their conditions improve. The other half will depend on Meals on Wheels as their primary source of nutrition on an on-going basis. Just over half of those receiving meals long term are living on less than $1,276 a month. For this group, the loss of the Meals on Wheels program would be devastating.

What the future holds in store
The advent of Medicaid redesign, the rising tsunami wave of incoming Baby-Boomers hitting the magic mark of sixty (aka age of eligibility for many aging services), an impossibly unpredictable economy, and the burgeoning demand for community based aging services all collectively assist in firmly establishing the need for organizations like Senior Services of Albany and all that they provide to the community. Change and growth are necessary for us as we look to the future. Funding challenges and financial stability versus growing need and limited resources are the conundrums that Senior Services of Albany, and other like organizations, are faced with more and more each day. Yet we persevere. Innovation, collaboration, and partnerships are the catch words of funders, both governmental and private alike, these days. Senior Services of Albany has developed and has these types of important relationships with a network of literally dozens of entities since we began, believing firmly that in order to best serve our community it is vital that we work together.

“The organization is blessed to have a team of over 500 volunteers that are a valued, key element to many of the programs and services that we provide.”
The organization is blessed to have a team of over 500 volunteers that are a valued, key element to many of the programs and services that we provide. For example, we have long established relationships with entities such as AARP, Living Resources, the Center for Disability Services, Wildwood Programs, the Towns of Guilderland and Bethlehem Senior Departments, and a number of area businesses and agencies that provide important volunteer support that assist the agency with the Meals on Wheels home delivered meal program, Grocery Shopping Assistance, Drive Safe programming, and the Friendly Home Visitor program to name a few.

“Senior Services of Albany’s major program areas—Nutrition Services/Meals on Wheels, Transportation, and Community Care Services Department—are always available resources to older adults whether in Albany, or depending on the program, the Capital Region.”

Senior Services of Albany embraces innovation, enhanced coordinated services delivery, and change. We may have changed our home, but we continue to be one of the largest providers of aging services in the Capital Region touching the lives of thousands of people in need each day.

To learn more about Senior Services of Albany or how you can support our organization, please visit www.seniorservicesofalbany.com or call 518-465-3322.

Jane Schramm is the Executive Director/CEO of Senior Services of Albany. She has more than twenty-five years of experience working with not-for-profit organizations, as well as government and private business. She was formerly the Executive Director of the Guilderland Chamber of Commerce and also served as the Community Affairs Ombudsman for the City of Albany following her work as a Director for the Capital District YMCA.
Depressed? Finding It Hard to Go On? VA Has Your Back

By Joseph Hunter, Ph.D.

Chris has some advice for other Veterans whose life circumstances have led to thoughts of suicide:

“Don’t be afraid to reach out to the VA and ask for help. They’re really good about respecting you for what you’ve done. It saddens me when I hear of one of my brothers or sisters dying because they didn’t get the right help.”

Chris is an Albany area Veteran who asked that his last name not be used. He has lived a rough fifty-two years that included an abusive childhood, three stints of active duty service in the Army, multiple occupational injuries, four marriages, unemployment, homelessness, and the suicides of two close friends. “I survived those years, I didn’t live them,” he says.

Since his inpatient psychiatry stay and follow-up outpatient therapy at Albany’s Stratton Veterans Administration Medical Center that were prompted by a suicide crisis, however, Chris has been working to reinvigorate life passions, while building on strengths. To this end, he has again assumed his role among friends and family as the strong one who cares for others. In addition, he has rediscovered his love for writing, which helps him sort through his feelings, reconnect with happy memories, and even help himself and others find laughter in their situations.

A touching poem reflecting on fond childhood memories that Chris wrote has been incorporated into presentations I have given.

In my presentations I point out our intervention is truly quite simple—it helps the Veteran who is having thoughts of suicide identify strengths and interests that can be used to help build back a life that has meaning and purpose.

I believe we are biologically pre-wired to use our strengths according to our interests and passions to bring about positive changes in our social environment. Someone who has lost this sense of meaning and purpose, who feels a lack of belongingness or as a burden to others, is often unable to reestablish such life meaning and purpose without professional help.

My premise and an associated intervention strategy designed to augment usual psychiatry care, entitled “SIMPLE,” will be tested in a two-year study partially underwritten by the Gerontological Society of America, which has named me a Hartford/VA Geriatric Social Work Scholar.

Because the majority of Veteran suicides are among those fifty and older, this intervention aptly targets older adults, and the burgeoning number of baby-boomers (consisting largely of Vietnam Veterans) punctuates the importance of such a focus. The intervention clarifies the at-risk Veteran’s interests to establish recovery priorities, builds upon his or her strengths to increase self-worth and reinforce hope in self-initiated success, provides for practical needs to enable the Veteran’s success,
and engages supportive friends and family members to achieve sustained recovery. In addition, the
development of a tailored safety plan that interjects tasks to expand meaningful life experiences is a
central feature of the intervention.

I believe our approach is different from many traditional treatment models, which are often problem-
focused. I believe that without a passion for life based on an appreciation of your unique abilities
and potential contributions to others or society, it’s hard to care about your own well-being and
take action to improve your life circumstances. Behavioral health conditions, such as depression or
alcohol abuse, further impair a person’s ability to make positive life changes without help.

“I believe we are biologically pre-wired to use our strengths according to our interests and passions
to bring about positive changes in our social environment.”

Every one of the 153 VA medical centers in the country provides cutting-edge behavioral health
services based on practices that have been shown by research to be effective. In addition to the
VAMC in Albany, Stratton has 12 community-based outpatient clinics that cover a large geographic
area including points south to Ulster County, north to Clinton and Franklin Counties, and west to
Delaware County. Each of these clinics provides primary care and behavioral health services.

I have found that having a hobby and participating in an organization are two of the strongest
protective factors for seniors, but times are tough these days. The truth is that those who attempt
suicide in the face of overwhelming circumstances and do not die are usually extremely grateful
they are still alive. Older adults, especially those with compromised health, are much more likely to
succeed when attempting suicide—they may not be so lucky as to survive a suicide attempt before
realizing there are other options. Treatment, as an alternative to suicide, is a better option and we
know treatment works. Veterans, like Chris, are actively recovering from challenging conditions and
circumstances every day at our VA. For ‘high risk’ Veterans, recent research has shown that having
a service-connected disability is a protective factor against suicide, which shows VA truly is a place
Veterans can lean on during challenging times.

If you or a loved one is experiencing warning signs of suicide, such as talking or writing about
suicide, seeking access to means of suicide, or expressing feelings of hopelessness or despair, seek
help. The Veterans Crisis Line is a conduit to VA services and is available 24/7 to all Veterans and
concerned family members at 1-800-273-8255. Non-veterans may also call this number to reach the
National Suicide Prevention Life Line. Veterans may also enroll in VA care online at www.va.gov or
by contacting the local VA at 113 Holland Avenue at 518-626-5646.

Joseph Hunter, PhD, is the Suicide Prevention Coordinator at Stratton VA Medical Center. Dr. Hunter has national
leading roles with the VA in the areas of resource development, training, research, and suicide prevention.
This Is for the Over Fifty Generation

By Robert Herman

I thought about the thirty year business I ran with 1,800 employees, all without a Blackberry that played music, took videos and pictures, and communicated with Facebook and Twitter.

“The world is just getting too complex for me.”

I signed up, under duress, for Twitter and Facebook so my seven kids, their spouses, 13 grandkids and two great-grandkids could communicate with me in the modern way. I figured I could handle something as simple as Twitter with only 140 characters of space.

That was before one of my grandkids hooked me up for Tweeter, Tweetree, Twhirl, TwitterFon, Tweetie, Tweetrrific, TweetDeck, TwitPix, and something that sends every message to my cell phone and every other program within the texting world. My phone was beeping every three minutes with the details of everything except the bowel movements of the entire next generation. I am not ready to live like this. I keep my cell phone in the garage in my golf bag.

The kids bought me a GPS for my last birthday because they say I get lost every now and then going to the grocery store or library. I keep that in a box under my tool bench with the Bluetooth (it’s red) phone I am supposed to use when I drive. I wore it once and was standing in line at Barnes & Noble talking to my wife as everyone in the nearest 50 yards was glaring at me. Seems I have to take my hearing aid out to use it, and I got a little loud.

I mean the GPS looked pretty smart on my dash board, but the lady inside was the most annoying, most rude person I had run into in a long time. Every ten minutes she would sarcastically say, “Recal-cu-lating.” You would think that she could be nicer. It was like she could barely tolerate me. She would let go with a deep sigh and then tell me to “Make a U-turn at the next light.” Then when I would make a right turn instead, it was not good.
When I get really lost now, I call my wife and tell her the name of the cross street, and while she is starting to develop the same tone as Gypsy, the GPS lady, at least she loves me.

To be perfectly frank, I am still trying to learn how to use the cordless phones in our house. We have had them for four years, but I still haven’t figured out how I can lose three phones all at once and have to run around digging under chair cushions and checking bathrooms and the dirty laundry baskets when the phone rings.

The world is just getting too complex for me. They even mess me up every time I go to the grocery store. You would think they could settle on something themselves, but this sudden “Paper or Plastic?” every time I check out just knocks me for a loop. I bought some of those cloth reusable bags to avoid looking confused, but I never remember to take them into the store with me. Now I toss it back to them. When they ask me “Paper or Plastic?” I just say, “Doesn’t matter to me. I am bi-sacksual.” Then it’s their turn to stare at me with a blank look.

I was recently asked if I tweet. I answered, “No, but I do toot a lot.”

P.S. I know some of you are not over fifty. I share this with you to allow you to forward it to those who are.

Robert Herman, who was an educator and state policy maker before retirement, now uses e-mail to share his observations about life in the twenty-first century.
Our Nation at a Crossroads

By Congressman Paul Tonko

Two-thousand-eleven has turned out to be a very tumultuous year for the American people and for our nation’s leaders. Our country is at a crossroads, and we face critical decisions that will not just affect our own lives, but the lives of our children and their children. We face a slow economic recovery from a devastating recession in which we lost more than eight million jobs. We face a potentially crushing budget deficit and national debt, which has only added to our economic uncertainty and contributed to our nation’s slow recovery. And we face the question of how to move forward in a way that will create new jobs now, and set the stage for growth for future generations and provide them the same opportunities that were given to us by our parents and grandparents. This is not a time for political positioning and the kind of rigid ideologies that prevent us from taking the necessary bold actions that will provide solutions to these problems. However, that is exactly what we’re seeing from Congress this year—a majority in the House of Representatives that is interested more in scoring political points than engaging in the robust debates and negotiations needed to create compromise. Who will be hurt? The American people—seniors included.

“The efforts addressing Medicare are especially troubling.”

Four times this year, the Republican Majority has put forward plans that would end Medicare for future generations, and they have also again expressed the desire to privatize Social Security and gamble our contributions on Wall Street. Imagine what would have happened to the retirement security of today’s seniors if that were the case when the economy collapsed nearly four years ago?

The efforts addressing Medicare are especially troubling. Republicans in our House passed a budget plan that would end Medicare and create a voucher plan that would force seniors to buy their health care insurance in the private market. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that future seniors would only be getting reimbursed at the rate of 32 cents for every dollar they spend on health care, forcing them to come up with the balance from their
limited income. With the average senior on Medicare earning a little over $19,000, they will be forced to make life threatening choices—do I buy groceries or do I buy prescriptions? Do I pay rent or do I pay medical bills?

So, there is a very real debate in Washington, in which one side is advocating asking our seniors to make sacrifices while protecting tax loopholes for corporations, subsidies for Big Oil, and tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

“Government plays a critical role as a partner to private industry, helping take new, cutting edge ideas from the drawing board to market, and providing incentives for companies to invest their own funds.”

Our deficit was not created by overspending on Medicare and Social Security. Our deficit was created by tax cuts, two wars, and a Medicare Part D prescription drug program that were not paid for—the previous administration and Congress did not adjust spending to account for those expenses. The last factor was the recession; eight million jobs lost resulted in a dramatic drop in tax revenue, while spending for unemployment insurance and other benefits increased as a result.

When you leave behind the rhetoric and focus on the facts, it is clear that we need a balanced approach to deficit reduction, one that couples spending cuts with the closing of corporate tax loopholes, the elimination of subsidies to Big Oil companies, and a return to Clinton-era tax rates for millionaires and billionaires. It does not make sense to just target domestic spending, and to ask seniors to shoulder part of the burden to get our debt and deficit under control.

Putting together a budget is really making a statement of priorities. Our number one need in this nation is job creation, however, this year the Republican majority has failed to put forward a single jobs bill. While we do need to get our spending under control, we must preserve government investments, particularly in technology and clean energy, which will lead to job growth. Government
plays a critical role as a partner to private industry, helping take new, cutting edge ideas from the drawing board to market, and providing incentives for companies to invest their own funds. Over the past year, I have embarked on a jobs tour of my Congressional District to highlight companies that have received government investment and are now growing on their own and, most importantly, hiring.

Please make sure that your voice is heard. We should be working to protect and strengthen Medicare and Social Security, two landmark programs that have prevented millions of seniors from falling into poverty. Instead of balancing our budget on the backs of seniors, we need a balanced plan that calls for sacrifices from those who can afford it the most. And we need to increase investments that will help create jobs. Our very future depends on it. 

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The Honorable Paul Tonko has represented portions of the Capital Region as an Assemblyman in the New York State Legislature and currently is the Congressman for the Capital Region. He is a passionate and hard working advocate for his constituents individually and as a community. Besides the aforementioned national political challenges, Congressman Tonko has been organizing a project to reclaim our rivers under the heading, Mighty Waters.
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IMAGES: Each issue of CCQ will use images of architecture and natural features that make the Capital Region special. The cover has an image of the garden of a Stockade home in Schenectady, NY; Nipper the Dog atop a building in Albany, NY; and the 18th century Johnson Map. This issue of CCQ uses images from The Schenectady Stockade.

CREDITS: The cover photograph of the garden of a Stockade home is by Beverly Elander. The cover photograph of Nipper the Dog is by Alan Goldberg, a lifelong Albany resident with an avid interest in photography. The photograph of the the Replica of a Dutch house and the Porch in a Stockade home are by Mary D’Alessandro-Gilmore. The photograph of the Historic street sign, Lawrence the Indian statue, the Planter, the Stockade neighborhood watch, the Historic sign, the Stockade streetscape, Participants in the Stockade Walkabout, and the Stockade Art Show are by Beverly Elander.

This and past issues of CCQ are available in pdf format on www.albanyguardiansociety.org.
Organizations and their Websites that may be of interest to CCQ readers

Albany County Department for Aging  
www.albanycounty.com/departments/aging

Albany Roundtable  
www.albanyroundtable.com

American Library Council  
www.lff.org/about

Capital District Regional Planning Commission  
www.cdrpc.org

Center for Economic Growth  
www.ceg.org

Civic Ventures  
www.civicventures.org

Community Foundation for the Greater Capital Region  
www.cfgcr.org

Fulton County Office for the Aging  
www.fcofa.org

Generations United  
www.gu.org

Global Action on Aging  
www.globalaging.org

Government Law Center at Albany Law School  
www.albanylaw.edu/sub.php?navigation_id=668

Grantmakers In Aging  
www.giaging.org

Greene County Office for the Aging  
www.greengovernment.com/department/aging/index.htm

New York State Office for the Aging  
www.aging.state.ny.us

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute  
www.usm.maine.edu/ollinational

Rensselaer County Department for the Aging  
www.rensco.com/departments_familyservices.asp

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
www.rpi.edu

Rockefeller Institute  
www.rockinst.org

Sage Colleges  
www.sage.edu

Saratoga County Office for the Aging  
www.co.saratoga.ny.us/aindex.html

Schenectady County Department of Senior and Long Term Care Services  
www.schenectadycounty.com

Scholaric County Office for the Aging  
www.schohariecounty-ny.gov/CountyWebsite/OfficefortheAging/ofaservices.jsp

Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy  
www.scaany.org

Town of Colonie  
www.colonie.org

Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region  
www.trinityalliancealbany.org

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Aging Initiative  
epa.gov/aging

University Albany School of Public Health  
www.albany.edu/sph

University Albany School of Social Welfare  
www.albany.edu/ssw

United Way of the Greater Capital Region  
www.unitedwaygrc.org

Warren County Office for the Aging  
www.co.warren.ny.us/oaka

Washington County Office for the Aging  
www.co.washington.ny.us/Departments/Ofa/ofa1.htm

Our Mission

Albany Guardian Society continues to seek opportunities to improve the quality of life for seniors as we carry out our Mission.

- The mission of Albany Guardian Society is to engage in a broad spectrum of endeavors that will improve the quality of life for seniors.
- We will devote funding to develop and support services for seniors.
- We will create an environment that will maintain the growth of creative and innovative ideas.
- We will fund the exchange of information to enable interested parties to learn how to create a better standard of living for our elders.
- We will attract additional resources to increase the impact we can make as we remain mindful of our mission to serve the elderly.