

Doing Good

By Barbara Kanellopoulos

When Attorney Carol Kenney volunteers at the Falmouth Senior Center, she senses a special ambience in the room where she offers legal advice to seniors. It radiates from the portrait of a white-haired, smiling woman that dominates one of the walls. The woman is Eileen Finnell, the Council on Aging's first president. She is also Carol's mother. "There's no way I would not be here," Carol said to me. "My mother was a strong believer in volunteering. She helped make this place happen."

Eileen Finnell (1906-1990) spent much of her adult life making many things happen. She and her husband, a colonel in the USAF, came to Otis Air Force Base in the early 50s. Housing problems and the need for a local chapter of the American Women's Voluntary Service caught her attention. She joined other military wives to establish the local chapter and to improve the housing situation at the Base. From the beginning, connecting with others to work for a common purpose was her way of doing good.

Her life changed dramatically in 1953 when her husband died. Eileen was left with four children to support. She had a talent for selling real estate and soon Eileen Finnell Real Estate was up and running.

She joined the PTA and became one of its earliest presidents. Raising children and running a demanding business didn't preclude involvement in civic affairs; in her way of thinking they demanded it. She joined the Outlook Club, the Falmouth Council for Civic Beautification, and the Falmouth Business and Professional Women's Club. Her diverse affiliations led to her becoming an organizer for the Tricentennial Commission's ethnic festival. A founding member of the Council on Aging, she spent years seeking ways to make Falmouth more elderly-friendly.

Eileen Finnell was never one to join a club, pay her dues, and sit back passively. She took a leadership role, becoming either chair or president of these organizations. Throughout, her effort was voluntary, but she never thought of it as work. When she was named Citizen of the Year by the Chamber of Commerce in 1987, she said to those in attendance, "Become a volunteer. It's so rewarding."

Most people would agree that doing good is its own reward – it is inherently right. But, as the golden rule reminds us, it has a practical benefit. You make sure

the snow you shovel doesn't wind up in your neighbor's driveway in the expectation that your neighbor will do likewise. Mutual trust binds people together and fosters the creation of wider social networks in the community, like the Teaticket Association, Neighborhood Falmouth, PTOs, Falmouth Eats Together, the soup kitchen Around the Table, and other citizen groups. Sociologists tell us that the connectedness that results when people are engaged in public affairs is a community asset. They call it social capital.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam states that a community rich in social capital is productive because its residents, interacting frequently, learn to be trusting, cooperative, and caring. Towns where social connections are few and strained are costly places. Lawyers are needed where people believe that getting it in writing is safer than a handshake. They're also lonely places, the kind Yogi Berra may have had in mind when he said, "If the people don't want to come out to the ballpark, nobody's going to stop them."

Falmouth is fortunate to have had large deposits of social capital made by civic-minded citizens like Eileen Finnell. It's doubtful that she thought of her years of civic engagement as an "externality" that would benefit Falmouth's bottom line. Like many of her generation, doing good came naturally to her, like birdsong to birds.

Civic engagement is on the wane here and taking our social capital with it. Only 37.6% of eligible voters turned out for the May, 2013, local election. Clubs and associations in Falmouth are hard put to find new members to replace those who have died. Over 40 vacancies on town committees are waiting to be filled. The Senior Center and Neighborhood Falmouth need more volunteers to meet the needs of their members.

Are we in the midst of generational change? Are baby boomers and millennials so different from their parents and grandparents? Maybe not. Maybe all they need is another app for their mobile phones: an app to remind them that doing good is a good investment.

Silver Threads is created especially for people spending their golden years in Falmouth, written by these same senior citizens and presented by Neighborhood Falmouth, a nonprofit, membership organization, operating since 2009 to help Falmouth seniors live safely and comfortably in their own homes. For more information on joining, volunteering and donating, call [508-564-7543](tel:508-564-7543); or visit www.neighborhoodfalmouth.org.