



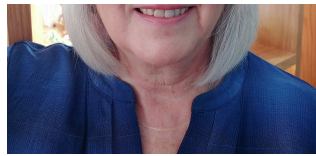
AARP Blacksburg Newsletter

April 2023



Pam Knox and Fred Piercy, Editors





Leslie Pendleton
AARP Blacksburg President

President's Column

Before drafting this column, I had been thinking about Black History and Women's Months and how our chapter could possibly tie those observances to topics for our January and February chapter programs. In simple terms, these annual observances focus attention on the historical contributions of Blacks and women in the United States. I realize it's important to recognize that not all Blacks and not all women fit neatly into their own broad categories.

Two of the opportunities I most value about my role in AARP are participating in monthly meetings with other Southwest Virginia chapters and serving as a member of AARP Virginia's Chapter Advisory Team (V-CAT). While our own chapter is comprised mostly of White members, other Southwest Virginia chapters, for example, Roanoke, Danville, and Lynchburg, as well as V-CAT are much more diverse in their makeup. Clearly the demographics in those areas are different from Blacksburg demographics. The largest Roanoke city/county racial and ethnic groups are White (57.4%), Black (28.6%), and Hispanic (6.6%). Blacksburg's largest racial and ethnic groups are White (79.1%), Asian (11.9%), and Black (5.0%) (Source: U.S. Census)

While we have a large percentage of women in our chapter and among our board leadership, we do lack racial and ethnic diversity. One outcome of a pre-pandemic focus group during a chapter program to solicit input on "how we are doing" were recommendations that we work toward a more diverse membership. In addition to recruiting racially and ethnically diverse members, I believe we could also do more to reach out to the 727 veterans and the working-class population in our New River Valley community.

I am very pleased that we now have an active Membership Chair, Wilma
Dutton, who has taken on the challenge of increasing diversity. To share

Dotson, who has taken on the challenge of increasing diversity. To share information about our chapter, Wilma has recently attended meetings across the NRV, for example, the Blacksburg Newcomers Club, the retired Montgomery County teacher's group, and the NAACP Montgomery County-Radford City-Floyd branch. She has also connected with the NRV Women's Facebook page which has 12-15 interest groups. However, such a challenge takes the efforts of many. One or two leaders or even a small committee can't do it all by themselves.

At the invitation of Barter Theater playwright-in-residence, Catherine Bush, Wilma, and I will attend "The Last Romance," a play by Joe di Pietro on April 1st. The play will be followed by a Barter Connects event "It's Never Too Late for Love" conversation about the benefits of companionship through AARP membership. After my seven years of involvement in our chapter, I am convinced that substantial benefits are best reaped with active engagement. Our board repeatedly discusses membership data, and some of us wonder why our informative and interesting programs and other events draw only about 10-20% of our members. So, HOW are we really doing?

According to the Council of Nonprofits, a "diverse board sensitive to cultural differences is usually one that has a stronger capacity to attract and retain talented board members - as well as to be in touch with community needs." If increased diversity among our membership is a goal we share, then it seems logical that we must initiate change through diverse representation on our board.

Diverse representation begets diverse perspectives. Critically important to any organization's success, diverse perspectives result in better networks, connections, and insight. Each person brings his or her own unique perspectives, work and life experiences, and personal and professional contacts to their service.

There are actions we can take and questions we can consider as we move forward to increase our diversity. We can begin by having frank conversations about our board's current makeup and culture and the potential value of increased racial and ethnic diversity. What if we reach out to a wider pool of

potential board members, say beyond Virginia Tech retirees? We can seek individuals with varied professional and occupational expertise, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences. In other words, we can toss out a wider net.

Further, are we creating a welcoming environment within our board meetings and chapter programs? Are we culturally sensitive and, in general, do we make others feel comfortable? Or do we (unintentionally, of course) make them feel marginalized? Do we include all members in conversations, or do we dismiss input when that input offers a difference of opinion? Programs and events that reflect that diverse perspectives and interests will likely draw wider audiences and increased participation among our members.

Whether we like to admit it or not, we're all susceptible to our own biases and stereotypes. The term "implicit bias" is used to describe attitudes toward certain people or groups that associate stereotypes with them without conscious knowledge. Blacks and other racial and ethnic groups, women, and seniors all understand the negative impact of bias and stereotypes. Let's look within ourselves and examine our own biases, stereotypes, and ideologies to examine how they might personally impact us and those around us. In other words, let's each do our part to make our chapter a more friendly and accepting environment for those who choose to engage and welcome those who offer diverse perspectives. Finally, if you have constructive feedback on how we could work toward more diversity, I certainly welcome your input and ideas.

In This Issue

- President's Message
- Chapter Events/Announcements
- Chapter Officers and Committees
- Spotlight: AARP Community Service Committee
- Upcoming Chapter Programs
- Community Events
- Trail Notes
- New YMCA Program
- The Worth and Joy of AARP Chapter Membership

- Death Talk by Norman Lobsenz
- Resources from Stephanie Huckestein's AARP Presentation
- Membership Application and Dues

Chapter Events, Announcements

1st Tuesdays (April, May, June, August) **Board Meeting**, 10:00 a.m.,
Blacksburg Recreation Center, Social Room

3rd Tuesdays (April, May, August) **Chapter Program**, 11:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m.,
Blacksburg Recreation Center, Community Room

Annual AARP Blacksburg June Picnic

Thursday, June 22, 2023, 5:00-7:00 p.m.

Home of Terry Wildman & Sue Magliaro

3335 Elk Creek Drive, Christiansburg

(Stay tuned for more info to be posted.)

Blacksburg Chapter #2613

Chapter Officers 2023

President – Leslie Pendleton, lpendleton@gmail.com

Vice President – Jerry Niles, niles@vt.edu and Don Creamer, dgc2@vt.edu

Secretary – John Burton, jburton@vt.edu

Treasurer – Pat Ballard, pballard@vt.edu

Board of Directors (term ending date)

2024: John Burton, Judith Jones, Beth Grabau, Fred Piercy, Nola Elliot

2025: Pam Knox, Wilma Dotson, Pat Hipkins

Newsletter Editors: Fred Piercy and Pam Knox

AARP Chapter Website: www.blacksburgaarp.org

Committee Chairs

Awards: John Burton, jburton@vt.edu

Care: Leslie Pendleton, lpendleton@gmail.com

Chaplin: Sandy Birch, birch@vt.edu

Community Service: Judith Jones, judith@vt.edu

Financial Review: Jerry Niles, niles@vt.edu

Health and Wellness: Leslie Pendleton, lpendleton@gmail.com

Hospitality: Terry Wildman, wiley@vt.edu

Leadership Development Co-Chairs: Jerry Niles, niles@vt.edu /Don Creamer, dgc2@vt.edu

Legislative: Vacant

LLI Partnership: Jerry Niles, niles@vt.edu

Mailchimp/Website: Don Creamer, dgc2@vt.edu

Membership: Wilma Dotson, wdotson7@juno.com

Newsletter Co-Chairs: Pam Knox, knoxphd@comcast.net and Fred Piercy, Piercy@vt.edu

Program Co-Chairs: Wendy Baldwin, wendybburg@gmail.com and Pat Hipkins, phipkins@vt.edu

AARP Virginia Liaison: Ben Crawford, ben.crawford@vt.edu

Community Foundation Liaison: Vacant

TOB/BCC Liaison: Joy Herbert, jherbert@blacksburg.gov

VTRA Liaison: Vacant



Spotlight: AARP Community Service Committee

Judith Hess Jones

The community service committee's primary goal is to seek out and coordinate board approved community projects that support the local community, especially seniors. The committee works with several area non-profit

especially senior. The committee works with several area non-profit organizations to fulfill our mutual goals. Some examples of the organizations and activities include the AARP Tax Aide program, AARP Driver Safety Courses, the National Day of Service, calls or visits to local retirement/care facilities, collection of charitable donations for various food pantries such as the Interfaith Food Pantry, MCEAP Food Bank, Vittles for Veterans, pet food and others.

The committee also works to maintain active relationships with community organizations such as VCOM, Community Health Center of NRV, Montgomery County Christmas Store, Blacksburg Branch Library, Blacksburg Interfaith Council, Montgomery County Emergency Assistance Program, Southwest Virginia Veterans Cemetery Volunteers, Montgomery County Public Schools, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, Virginia Tech YMCA, Virginia Tech Engage, AmeriCorps, and organizations that support Veterans age 50+ in our community.

Upcoming Chapter Meetings



April 18, 2023 -- Mindfulness for Interconnection: An Interactive Exploration, Speaker: **Jamie Reygale**, Executive Director, InStill Mindfulness; 11:30 – noon, coffee and conversation; noon – 1:00pm, presentation.

Jamie Reygale, CMT-P (Executive Director) began studying mediation techniques in the late 1990s and has been practicing mindfulness since 2003. His interest in mindfulness led him to create the nonprofit, *InStill Mindfulness* in 2016, which he has run as Executive Director from that time. He has taught mindfulness in many settings, including public schools, businesses, independent workshops, and music festivals, and written a short book on

mindfulness practice called *The Unenlightened Buddah*. His work history includes much work with disadvantaged youth, music promotion and management, journalism, teaching, and corporate customer service. He has served on the boards of the Wilderness Society, the Queensland Music Industry Association, radio station 2NCR, and Blue Mountain School. Jamie holds a BA in Psychology from Murdoch University, is an IMTA Certified Mindfulness Teacher, a graduate of The School for the Work with Byron Katie and has completed Level 1 Focusing training.



Dwayne Yancey

May 16, 2023 – Why Newspapers are Dying but Democracy Isn't,

Speaker: Dwayne Yancey, 11:30 – noon, coffee and conversation; noon – 1:00pm, presentation.

Mr. Dwayne Yancey has more than four decades of experience in Virginia journalism, including 39 years with *The Roanoke Times* as a reporter, editor, and editorial page editor for 7 years. Twice he won the Virginia Press Association's D. Latham Mims Award for Editorial Leadership and was inducted into the Virginia Communications Hall of Fame. Mr. Yancey is an internationally produced playwright and the author of *When Hell Froze Over*, a book about Virginia politics.

AARP Blacksburg Community Events

Spring and Summer Events

Blacksburg Parks and Recreation

Blacksburg is offering activities for seniors at minimal cost. Registration is open by walk-in, phone-in, mail-in or on-line. Sign up and view new programs at <https://recreation.blacksburg.gov>

Christiansburg Recreation Center

Christiansburg offers a wide range of programs for seniors. Information and registration are available at the beginning of each month through a Seniors newsletter available through <https://www.christiansburg.org/1082/Recreation-Center> .

April

Every Wednesday 2 p.m.- 6 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m.- 2 p.m. Blacksburg Farmer's Market

Saturday, April 1

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Easter Eggs-Travaganza, Sinkland Farms
www.sinklandfarms.com

Sunday, April 2

11 am-5 p.m. Sunday Funday Sinkland Farms www.sinklandfarms.com

Friday, April 7

8 p.m. Shirlette Ammons, Moss Arts Center

8 p.m. Egg-Streme Easter Egg Party, Christiansburg Kiwanis Park

Thursday, April 13 Friday, April 14

8 p.m. Donny Miles, Moss Arts Center

Saturday, April 22

TBD Blacksburg FORK AND CORK FESTIVAL, Historic Smithfield Plantation,
www.blacksburgforkandcork.com

Sunday, April 23

12-6 p.m. 62nd International Street Fair, VT Alumni Mall

4 p.m. Opera Roanoke and Blacksburg Master Chorale, Moss Arts Center

Saturday, April 29

7:30 p.m. Cecile McLorin Salvant, Moss Arts Center

May

Every Wednesday 2 p.m.- 6 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m.- 2 p.m. Blacksburg Farmer's Market

Every Thursday 3p.m.-7 p.m. (starting May 18) Christiansburg Farmer's Market,
Christiansburg Recreation Center Parking Lot

Saturday, May 13

5 p.m. – 9 p.m. Rockin' Main Street Concert, Christiansburg

June

Every Wednesday 2 p.m.- 6 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m.- 2 p.m. Blacksburg Farmer's Market

Every Wednesday 8 p.m.- 10 p.m. Blacksburg's Market Square Jam

Every Thursday 3p.m.-7 p.m. Christiansburg Farmer's Market, Christiansburg Recreation Center
Parking Lot

End of June Blacksburg Restaurant Week

Annual AARP Blacksburg June Picnic
Thursday, June 22, 2023, 5:00-7:00 p.m.
Home of Terry Wildman & Sue Magliaro
3335 Elk Creek Drive, Christiansburg
(Stay tuned for more info to be posted)

July

Every Wednesday 2 p.m.- 6 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m.- 2 p.m. Blacksburg Farmer's Market

Every Wednesday 8 p.m.- 10 p.m. Blacksburg's Market Square Jam

Every Thursday 3p.m.-7 p.m. Christiansburg Farmer's Market, Christiansburg Recreation Center Parking Lot

Tuesday, July 4

10 a.m.-4 p.m. Festival, Main Street, Christiansburg

9:15 p.m. Fireworks, near Walmart, Christiansburg

Friday, July 14

4 p.m. -8. p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Saturday, July 15

11 a.m.- 8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Sunday, July 16

Time to be announced, *Arts at the Market*, Media Building Lawn on Draper Rd., across from Market Square

11 a.m.-8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Friday, July 21

4 p.m.-8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Saturday, July 22

11 a.m.- 8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Sunday, July 23

11 a.m.-8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Friday, July 28

4 p.m.-8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Saturday, July 29

11 a.m.- 8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Sunday, July 20

11 a.m.-8 p.m. 4th Annual Sunflower Festival, Sinkland Farms,
www.sinklandfarms.com

Trail Notes

Ellett Valley Nature Trail

blacksburg.gov/Home/Components/FacilityDirectory/FacilityDirectory/84/2359)

Beth Grabau, Susan Terwilliger, and Pat Hipkins

The Ellett Valley Nature Trail is a short (one mile) loop trail located in the wooded, 109-acre Ellett Valley Recreational Area. The trail is marked as easy in AllTrails but because of several steep inclines, it would better qualify as moderate (<https://www.alltrails.com/trail/us/virginia/ellett-valley-nature-trail>).

The trailhead is easy to miss on Jennelle Road and the bumpy entranceway is best navigated with a higher clearance automobile than a typical sedan. A hiker

is rewarded with a nice view of the surrounding valley in wintertime, but it is blocked by foliage in the summer. There are a few interpretive nature signs provided about the area and a karst spring is also noted along the trail. The trail is narrow, often rocky, and partly overgrown in spots. There is a small optional loop designated on the trailhead kiosk and clearly marked along the trail. There are benches located at intervals, but they are in questionable states of repair. Parking is limited to five or six spots but has never been full when we visited. In summary, the trail is close to town, short, and pleasant but some overdue trail maintenance is needed.





Joining Generations event at Warm Hearth Village

New YMCA Student Program Promotes Connection and Companionship with Seniors!

Ethan Andres

VT YMCA *Joining Generations* (formerly called Senior Connections) is a program that seeks to create life-long relationships between people in different stages of life. We are partnering with the Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology and AARP Blacksburg to expand our impact in the New River Valley region. The *Joining Generations* Program consists of volunteers who meet with older individuals on a regular basis to talk about life, play, games, and have fun together. We are also planning to host community events at multiple retirement homes in Blacksburg and Christiansburg. If you are looking to find a new friend, or know someone who would be interested, contact us at joininggenerations@vtymca.org.



The Worth and Joy of AARP Chapter Membership

Robert B. Crawford

Most folks do not know that the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization for Americans nearing the age

of retirement with approximately 38 million members and nearly a million members in Virginia. A few members, a very few, are in AARP chapters. We are one of these few. I've been a member of our chapter since the early 1990s. So when Fred Piercy asked me to give a brief opinion about the worth of our chapter, I thought it would be easy to do. It was not. The more I thought about it the more difficult it became. But here's my shot.

The Blacksburg Chapter embraces AARP's mission to help people 50+ lead their best lives, improve communities, and more. For example, it wasn't many years ago that Carl McDaniels, Dr. George Smith (Bob) and I drove together to Roanoke Memorial Hospital. Carl was president of the Blacksburg AARP Chapter and I was VP or vice-versa, I can't remember. The purpose of our meeting was to advocate for the establishment of a new school/college for physicians. Ours was a "long shot" request arranged by Dr. Smith. We felt this could be accomplished with help from VT and the NRV Community and had a lengthy productive discussion with Nancy Agee and two other administrators whose names I don't recall: One of them was the CEO (not Agee) who left shortly thereafter. It was obvious to me they respected and admired Dr. Smith. It was also obvious that the good name of the Blacksburg AARP chapter, enhanced by the state AARP office, had preceded us.

Carl and I, as chapter officers, pledged financial and active support to establish a new teaching hospital. Dr. Smith emphasized the need, what the possibilities were and strongly backed our promise to obtain support from AARP and Virginia Tech. At the conclusion of the meeting and on the drive back to Shawsville, all three of us felt the meeting had been a huge success. Looking backward and what has happened since, it certainly was because the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine is of inestimable worth to our region. Further, the chapter volunteer work developed strong friendships with two fine people: Carl McDaniels and Bob Smith. By the way, if you knew Carl, you knew he could sell refrigerators to Eskimos.

To be in our (or any) chapter you must first be a national member.

National membership has many well-known popular benefits and is well worth the \$16 cost. Chapter membership dues are separate and have benefits and value that differs from the required national member membership.

value that differs from the required national member membership.

Benefits AARP members receive by joining the Blacksburg (or other) chapter:*

Awards and Recognition: The Blacksburg Chapter and Virginia AARP (state office) have recognition programs for individual members and groups. For example, **Judith Jones**, **Irene Peterson** and **Linda Correll** received wide public recognition last December for their outstanding service— receiving **Community Spirit & Chapter Service Awards**.

The **AARP name and brand** are valuable assets to the chapter and to individuals in the chapter. They enhance the credibility of chapter activities and usually receive more community support and recognition than ad hoc groups in the community. The **AARP Foundation** provides additional support and assistance to community projects. **Educational material** that identifies, explains and offers solutions to issues, gives the AARP position on issues, and helps serve the community. AARP provides a wide variety – thousands -- of pamphlets & booklets with factual information to inform and educate members. Most are free.

Training is provided in volunteer development, leadership and technical skills: For example, I have received training from AARP experts on how to write a news release, interview candidates for office, how to Zoom, use Facebook, avoiding fraud and much more. Other benefits include **monthly programs** with interesting speakers, the **chapter newsletter** (which you are currently reading, plus the AARP monthly **Bulletin** and **AARP The Magazine** (which had the largest circulation in the nation in 2021).

Networking and new friends: Through AARP Blacksburg, there are social and service opportunities that come from our educational programming and seminars. Members also gain cultural awareness and knowledge about social justice issues. They find life-long friends who have a variety of interests and talents. I have heart-warming memories of fun times at chapter meetings, picnics and community service activities. We were all doing good together.

Partnerships and cooperative arrangements with other community-based organizations. For example, the Blacksburg Chapter partners with the **Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM)**, **NRV Agency on Aging**, **RSVP**,

the **Lifelong Learning Institute at VT**, **Micah's Soup for Seniors** and more -- **to do good**. All these examples are proof that working together works -- both within the chapter and without. And finally, there is an intrinsic value of "doing good". The **inner satisfaction**, the **good feeling**, and the **joy** you have when you, together with others, help make your community a better place to live, work and raise children. You don't get the benefits above by just carrying a membership card. It has been said that the more you put into something the more you get out of it. That is certainly true with AARP chapter membership, and in my case; I have received more than I have put in.

** For national member benefit information, go online and Google "**AARP Bulletin** of December 2022". This issue lists two pages of benefits under the title, "Why Membership Is for Me." Volunteerism has changed in recent years and AARP has reorganized their volunteer structure so that now some of the above benefits are received by volunteers who are not necessarily AARP chapter members. Virginia has 35 AARP chapters. Nationally there are 791, and the number is decreasing. New chapters are **not** now being organized.*

Death Talk

Norman Lobsenz

Note from Fred Piercy, AARP Newsletter Co-editor: *In 2005, Norman Lobsenz, a popular professional writer, friend, and former co-author, then 86, sent me the article below as a rough draft, before he even had a title for it. I tried to find a citation for it but gave up after 45 minutes of Googling. This article was something Norman was working on that he called his "death talk" article. He thought I'd be interested in it. Norman, in a handwritten note to me, said that it "needs to be cut about 35% before I sent it to the Digest, or elsewhere..."*) Pam Knox, newsletter co-editor, and I found it to be both engaging and powerful, with an important message for seniors. It is a little dated in that medical practice today would not condone the decision the doctor and Norman made 40 years ago. Still, Norman shares some useful advice for all of us.

Norman published over 1000 articles in magazines such as Reader's Digest, Redbook, Woman's Day, and Parade, and more than 20 books, all on marriage and family related topics, including No-Fault Marriage, How to Stay Married, Styles of Loving, and (with me), Stop Marital Fights Before They Start. Norman died at the age of 93 in 2012.

Benjamin Franklin said it first: "In this world nothing is certain except death and taxes." In the 200-plus years since he wrote those words there has been no end of talk about our personal taxes, while a curtain of near-total silence has closed off virtually any conversation about our personal mortality. Young people, it is said, find it hard even to imagine that one day they will die. We older men and women, though we know better, still deny the fact of our inevitable end, or gloss over it with pretty images of an afterlife or try lamely to joke about it; as Woody Allen said, "I don't mind dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

The fact that I want to contemplate and talk about my death while still reasonably alive and well confounds most folks. To me, now almost 86, it seems not only to be of some practical value but, more to the point, emotionally positive. Instead of fearing the Grim Reaper, or hoping to ignore him, I prefer to have the advantage of confronting him on my turf, and on my terms. Some years ago, I thought it would be both sensible and considerate of me to send my three sons a list of whom and how to contact – my doctor, lawyer, accountant, bank, credit card companies, etc. – when I died. I also listed the location of all my vital documents: "copy of will and living will in steel file under desk"; "condo deed in top drawer of office file cabinet"; "safe deposit key in bottom bureau drawer."

Nor did I stop there. Having had, years ago, to cope with the confusion of details after my father's sudden death. I also gave my sons the names of friends, colleagues and organizations who should be notified of my demise; where to have me cremated, and what [to] do with my ashes. I even drafted a modest obituary they could use. I assumed I was being a wonderful Dad, making it so easy for them to settle my affairs. DO you think they appreciated my efforts to save them time and energy in dealing with the debris of my

my clients to save them time and energy in dealing with the details of my death? They did not. They referred to my notes as “the morbid memos,” and they still groan when, every couple of years, I send updates. “Come on, Dad,” my youngest son said recently, “You’re not going to die – at least not soon.” “Don’t be stupid” I replied. “I am, and so someday are you, and as intelligent adults we need to talk about it.” But we didn’t, and haven’t, and since then I’ve learned that hardly anyone I know wants to discuss death or dying either.

Here’s another example, one that does not involve family members who may feel that talking about your death would be too irrelevant or intrusive. I volunteer as a peer counselor in a community care program for older adults. Each week I meet with one or two clients who may be ill, or emotionally troubled, or just lonely, and I also lead special-interest groups. There is never a problem finding members for my writing group, or a making-marriage-better group, or even a group for persons going through a divorce. But when I tried to start a group on what I called “the art of dying well” no one signed on. I was more than merely disappointed. I could not believe that the topics I’d suggested for possible discussion would seem so threatening. For instance: If you could write your own obituary, how would it read? Who would you want to speak at your memorial service? What do you think they would say? What values would you want to pass on to your grandchildren in an “ethical will”? What would you most regret not having done? We placed scores of flyers in churches and synagogues, libraries, and community centers. There was not one response.

You may ask, at this point why I believe talking about one’s mortality is so important. It is because I know from bitter experience that not talking about it can, in the end, be emotionally devastating. What I am about to tell you happened 40 years ago yet is still a vivid imprint on my life. My then wife, Virginia, and I had met soon after each of us survived a difficult divorce. We came to love each other deeply, married and set about re-making our lives. Three months after our wedding she fell ill – a fever, muscle aches, fatigue. Nothing serious, I thought, until the hematologist who examined her bluntly said, “Your wife has acute leukemia. There’s nothing we can do for her. She has no more than a few months to live.” Stunned, I walked around like a zombie. Intellectually, I knew that there was, in that time, no successful treatment for the

disease. But how could I tell the woman I loved, whom I had just married that she was going to die?

A few days later I met privately with the hematologist. “How could you give me that diagnosis so coldly?” I asked. “It’s the only way I know how, the only way I can,” he replied. “But now, how can I help you?” At that moment I realized I could not, then, tell Virginia our new life together would soon end. And perhaps I would postpone giving her that news for a while. “Doctor,” I said, “will you help me keep this a secret from her for a moment?” He hesitated, then nodded, and so became my accomplice in this conspiracy that would ultimately last for more than six months. To succeed in the deception, we had to finesse two problems. First, Virginia was the public relations director for a health organization. She knew medical terminology. Second, she would need tests, medications, transfusions; she would want to know what they were for. In the end, the doctor and I created a “diagnosis” of a similar but non-fatal ailment with many of the same symptoms, close enough to explain her medications.

For the next few months, I lived the lie, though it was splitting me in two. To suddenly reverse course and tell her the truth would take away whatever hope she had. But was it fair to continue the deception? On the other hand, wasn’t false hope better than none? Back and forth I went, until I knew I had passed the point of no return. I knew I had no truly honest or loving way out. I was caught in my own trap.

On a cold January day Virginia had to go back to the hospital, exhausted. As we were leaving our apartment she sneezed and said, “That’s the last sneeze I’ll sneeze in this house.” Suddenly I thought, “Does she know, and all this time has been protecting me because she thinks I don’t? Have we been covering up to spare each other? Have we missed the chance to face this together? When I visited her at the hospital several evenings later, she was under an oxygen tent, straining to breathe but yet discussing poetry and Shakespeare with a nurse. After a while I had to leave. I kissed her good night. As I reached the door, she called to me: “Good night, sweet prince.” I knew the next line in Hamlet – “and flights of angels see thee to thy rest” – but could not bring myself to say it. Even at that moment I could not say a truthful goodbye.

Virginia died that night and, 40 years later, I still berate myself. Did I foreclose the chance to share her fears? Did I do the right thing? The wrong thing? After all this time I have finally come to an answer: I have never stopped regretting that I did not, from the outset, tell the truth. And I have learned the hard way that not confronting the fact of death and the task of dealing with it can haunt your mind for the rest of your life.

I share my life today with a loving partner – Helen is 16 years younger than I, and at firsts I wondered if the age difference was a concern for her. “In one way only,” she said. “Promise me you won’t die first.” “I promise, but suppose I have to break my promise?” “I’ll be really angry with you,” she said, squeezing my hand. And sad, but mostly angry. After all, you promised.” It served as a good beginning to our occasional conversations these days about what it is like to face up to the fact of one’s death, or the death of the person you love. Some evenings we sit by the fire while we quietly and, I hope, dispassionately, talk about such things as hospice services and “do not resuscitate” instructions. Helen has my power of attorney for health care; and she knows what I want. She knows I want a party, not a memorial service, where old friends will recall anecdotes and say what a great guy I was. She knows I want my ashes scattered in the ocean while the last movement of Grieg’s Piano concerto in A is played. She knows that I want my children to remember the credo by which I’ve tried to live. It is simple: Never give up. I do believe that these talks will make it easier for Helen to accept my death (if I break my promise!) and to go on calmly and hopefully with her life. I like to think that talking about my death in this casual way will make it seem – when it does happen – as if it has somehow already taken place in our minds. Though it bothers my ego to know that the world will go on quite well without me, I’ve had a long full life. I’ve seen much of the world. I’ve done good work, raised my sons, and above all, been loved. So, I’m emotionally really ready to go. After all, I’ve talked about it long enough.

**Resources cited in Stephanie Huckestein’s AARP Presentation:
“Attracting Butterflies and Hummingbirds to
Your Garden”**

Deer Resistant Plants

<http://chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Deer-resistant-Plants-Updated.pdf?fwd=no>

Butterflies and Moths of North America

<http://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/>

North American Butterfly Association

<http://www.nababutterfly.com/>

Department of Game and Inland Fisheries of Virginia

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/habitat/hummigbird-gardens.pdf>

Gardening

<https://gardening.ces.ncsu.edu/>

To apply for AARP Blacksburg Membership on line, click [here](#)



Forward

AARP BLACKSBURG CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

Fred Piercy and Pam Knox, Editors

piercy@vt.edu

knoxphd@comcast.net

Our mailing address is:

AARP Blacksburg Chapter, P.O. Box 10082, Blacksburg, VA 24062

<http://www.blacksburgaarp.org>

