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**Wisdom in the trees : a research project on how elders living in the Treehouse Community together with foster children and their families continue or expand the quality of meaning making in their everyday lives**

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Elizabeth (Libby) Hinze  
Wisdom in the trees: A research  
project on how elders living in the  
treehouse community together with  
foster children and their families  
continue or expand the quality of  
meaning making in their everyday  
lives

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined the oldest members of The Treehouse Community in western Massachusetts which is an intentional intergenerational community. Within this study 10 older adults living in the community participated in either a community held event or one-on-one interviews describing their felt life experiences before and after moving to Treehouse. Most of the participants made it clear that they did not show up at Treehouse looking for something to occupy their time. Rather this model which supports foster families and their children through an intergenerational lens corresponds with their life work, whether it be they had worked in child development earlier on in their career or some other form of social services.

The intent of this study was to raise awareness around models of communal living that support marginalized members of the community and challenge professionals to discover ways to find affordable living options for people at every stage of their life. Because the intentional intergenerational model has limited exposure to the world of research it is imperative that the professional community continues to track the experience and outcomes of these communities. In addition, it is critical that the field of social work take the growing number of older adults into account and offer curricula to students as to how we can address their social needs, and to do so from a critical gerontological lens and not from a cultural norm.

**WISDOM IN THE TREES: A RESEARCH PROJECT ON HOW ELDERS LIVING IN  
THE TREEHOUSE COMMUNITY TOGETHER WITH FOSTER CHILDREN AND  
THEIR FAMILIES CONTINUE OR EXPAND THE QUALITY OF MEANING MAKING  
IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES.**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2016

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged. I wish to thank all of the participants from the Treehouse Community who took the time to participate in this study. Thank you for allowing me into your communal space, your homes and especially into your past. To the staff for taking additional time out of your busy lives to help coordinate and prepare food for the symposium, for answering my frantic e-mails, texts and calls when I had last minute questions and meeting me on numerous occasions as I prepared to dive into this work. Thank you to my friends for your unwavering support, encouragement, and belief in me with a special shout-out to Jeff Wanago, Gayle Webb and Will Roth for your additional support like answering the phone at every hour of the day and night, endless proof readings and helping with graphic support.

To my thesis advisor Jean LaTerz, for your time, wisdom, support and guidance, and for grounding me when I was anxious and overwhelmed. To my daughters Randi and Wiley for continuing to support me as I travel down this dusty dirty path of life with my scrapped up knees and elbows. Your constant love, patience and understanding has always been the beacon of light at the end of this graduate school tunnel. Finally, to Dr. Jennifer Sasser whose commitment to this project and my work has been so incredibly humbling and I am forever grateful for.

## **DID YOU EVER DREAM**

Did you ever dream of a place in the clearing  
Near a school & a pool and a wood  
Where the people all cared about helping one another  
Doing whatever they could

Did you ever dream of a place in the clearing  
Where the children were loved by all  
And the potlucks were fine, yours and even mine  
And the trees turned red and gold in the fall

Did you ever dream of a place in the clearing  
Where the peace pole sat in the sun  
And the residents gathered in the name of peace  
To honor it 'til day was done

Did you ever dream of a place in the clearing  
Where all were treasured, every child, cat, puppy, and mouse  
Well that dream has come true it's right here for me & you  
Our community of love, Treehouse

By Lynne Knudsen

2016

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

In the United States, a widespread concern among the elderly population (elders) is social isolation and is associated with a decline in self-esteem and self-worth, as well as an increase in loneliness and depression (Fenster-Ehrlich, 2007; Weill & Rother, 1998-1999) cognitive impairments, in-home injuries, and malnutrition (Fenster-Ehrlich). By the year 2050, there will be an estimated 75 million elders that will be faced with such dilemmas (Fenster-Ehrlich). Whether living apart from loved ones in a nursing home or at home alone, elders are facing social isolation at an alarming rate. Communities are creating new solutions to address this problem. The Treehouse Community in Easthampton, MA, established in 2006, is one such community. Treehouse is one of three communities across the country that connects elders with another at-risk cohort, foster children. While the inspiration of this community has always been to support the children, literature shows that foster parents need a community of support to assist in adequately meeting the needs of the children in their care (Treehouse Foundation, 2014). The Treehouse Foundation has found that connecting elders with foster families better meets the needs of elders and foster care families.

Every year, approximately 400,000 children reside within the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). These children often arrive having experienced trauma (Bruskas, 2010) and present with a high level of emotional, behavioral, psychological, and educational needs (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013). Yet foster care alone has inadequate resources to support these needs in many cases (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Macomber, Geen, & Clark, 2001). Without extensive

support, foster children face educational risks which sometimes contribute to lower academic achievement and higher levels of behavioral problems (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). By combining foster children, foster families, and elders into an intentional intergenerational community, the goal of The Treehouse Community is to provide additional support to all, thereby increasing stability and life satisfaction for the participants.

For foster children and their families, the greatest need is additional help but for the community elders the elixir may be more than the extra needed support. Perhaps the personal value one receives when contributing to their community positively impacts an elder's life as well. There is clear evidence that healthy social relationships promote better health and people who face isolation have a "two-to-four-fold increase in all-cause mortality" (Golden et al., 2009). Research also shows when elders become isolated their self-esteem and self-worth are low and this is a significant predictor of poor health and leads to a rise in loneliness and depression (Fenster-Ehrlich 2007; Reblin & Uchino, 2008; Uchino, 2006; Weill & Rother, 1998-1999; Wilson & Moulton, 2010). Furthermore, recent studies show elders associate an active social life being more important than their physical health when it comes to successful aging (Depp & Jeste, 2006). Finally, in a national study through AARP, Wilson & Moulton (2010) discovered that lonely respondents were less likely to be involved in social networking and activities like attending religious events, volunteering, belonging to a local community organization, club or group or engaging in hobbies. Figures like these are vital to better understand the impact isolation has on our elder population and how important resources, like intentional intergenerational communities are to America's increasing numbers of elders.

The goal of this study is to determine if supporting foster care youth and their families is one of the elements that helps add meaning to elder's lives. I specifically looked at why living in



a community like Treehouse where you are expected to volunteer your time to the foster children and their families does or does not work for elders in the community. I did so by exploring the following question: How do elders living in *The Treehouse Community* together with foster children and their families continue or expand the quality of meaning making in their everyday lives.

I began my study by working with four elders at the Treehouse Community who voiced a desire to be active participants in the research on intentional intergenerational communities. Known as participant action research, by collaborating with these four elders in a focus group it deepened my research commitment to celebrate the experience of the elders by allowing their voices to rise above those who may define the value of meaning making and activity differently. As Schwandt (2007) describes “participatory action research (PAR) objective is to produce both useful knowledge and action as well as consciousness raising-empowering people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge” (p. 221). Together the elders who served as the focus group and I collaborated on various themes and questions which I then discussed at a symposium which was open to all elders of the Treehouse community. I also conducted one-on-one interviews for those members who were unable to attend the symposium or preferred the one-on-one approach. The data analysis used in my research came directly from the collaborative work that emerged during the symposium and the interviews. I used availability sampling and then snowballing techniques which comprised of two staff members at The Treehouse Community who helped me collaborate with the initial four elders and then provided the space at the Treehouse Community Center for the symposium.

When combing through the literature it became rather clear that isolation is extremely detrimental for elders. The key to a long and healthy life for elders is to be engaged with

community. What appears to be missing from the literature is how elders' themselves define being active within a community and how the activity helps make meaning in their lives. From a gerontological perspective it is important to gain knowledge from the voice of the elder, who is the expert on their own needs. The findings of this study will, hopefully, help social workers gain a truer perspective on how activities in later life enhance ones well-being. Katz (2000) said, "There is no universal description on how one describes *what is activity*, instead we must look at the different forms of activity" (p.136) adding, "Those who are elderly may experience meaningful activity through life experience and personal desire rather than definitions of activity which are promoted by professionals, research projects [and cultural norms which may be driven from a youth perspective]" (p.143). My hope is my research will inform social workers and intentional community developers how elders define a deeper sense of well-being in their lives which is complimented by the communities in which they live.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

As our population continues to face opportunities and challenges with advanced aging, the model of intergenerational support, as a way to nurture interdependence and meet societal needs, has grown in popularity across the United States (Kaplan, Shih-Tsen, Hannon, 2006). Within the last few decades there has been an increase in popularity around the influence multiple generations are having on one another and the benefits of an interdependent model. This body of research focuses on loneliness and depression in older adults due to social isolation and how communities are working to address the issue, older adults' involvement in community and how intentional intergeneration communities are supporting these efforts.

**Intentional Intergenerational Communities:** For clarification *intentional intergenerational communities* may be described as having specific rules or orders that all community members are to abide by. *Intergenerational* - includes members from birth to old age and *community* because they live in a specific area outside of mainstream society. Shaffer & Anundsen (1993), describe the difference between a functional community and a conscious or intentional community as, “members not only help each other take care of business together...but also reflect together on their common purpose, internal processes, and group dynamics” (p.11). By doing so the community honors both individual and the group, “challenging its members and itself to move beyond roles to wholeness...like a living body” (p.11).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The importance of defining my relationship with social and/or critical gerontology is imperative to the reader in order to understand the approach I have taken with this research project. By now it is clear that I am committed to co-facilitating this project with each older adult that I spoke with who lives at The Treehouse Community. I am honored to sit amongst the oldest members of this community and listen to their stories unfold both before and during their life in the community. With this honor comes a deep responsibility to ask the question: How does the community and society more broadly view the old? When we look at the theory of age it is important that people “disentangle their own intimate experience and its real causes from whatever they are offered as their ‘experience’ of aging” (Gullette, 1997, p.15). Sasser (2014) writes that critical gerontology “provides a lucid counter-argument to the narrow and over-determining normative discourses and practices that still dominate a great deal of the research and theory regarding adult development and aging, later life and old age” (p.2). I echo this sentiment and challenge readers to set aside this idea that with age comes an automatic debility. Age critic and theorist Gullette reminds readers “whether we know it or not, we are in the process of developing that substantial sense of self-over-time [which she defines as] age identity” (Gullette, 1997, p.2). Therefore, one should view an older human not by what our cultural has defined as a normative concept of decline or seeing age as a debilitating event, but rather to recognize one’s ability to become more compassionate, have better coping abilities, deeper sensitivity, resilience and other extensive traits (Gullette, 1997, p.2). By doing so one embraces the commitment of critical gerontology by understanding that debility can come at any age, and long-lived humans often offer a more complex and deeper understanding of human development by way of sharing their travels through the life course (Sasser, p.2).

The main purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover how older adults living at the Treehouse Community continue or expand meaning making in their everyday lives. As I review the research and literature around this topic I do so by understanding, and inviting the reader to keep in mind as well, that age is much more than a number. Rather with age comes a knowing, a knowing that only happens by witnessing the seasons come and go for generations - reminding us all that the only real expert on aging is one who has aged.

### **Review and Critique of the Literature**

This chapter is divided into six sections. Section one is based on social isolation and the effects it has on our aging population. Section two looks at elders and how personhood impacts their lives, while the third talks in detail about social participation in community. Section four addresses intentional intergenerational communities and how this model is impacting those who live in the community, and section five looks specifically at The Treehouse Community in Easthampton, MA. Finally, I end with a summary of the overall literature before moving into the methodological approach I have taken for this study.

#### **Social Isolation in the Older Adult Population**

Studies show that older adults who remain in their home often face social isolation, which attributes to a decline in self-esteem, self-worth, loneliness and depression (Fenster-Ehrlich, 2007; Weill & Rother, 1998-1999) along with dementia, in-home injuries, malnutrition, and other basic human functionality. Blazer (2002) describes loneliness as “a response to a discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social contact” (as cited by Golden, J., Conroy, R.M., Bruce, I., Denihan, A., Greene, E., Kirby, M. & Lawlor, B.A., 2009, p.694).

In a 2009 study out of Dublin, Irish researchers examined the relationship between social network, loneliness, depression, anxiety and quality of life in a community that houses

predominantly older adults. Nearly thirteen hundred people, age 65 and older, were recruited through their primary care Doctor's office over a nine-year period. Subjects were interviewed in their homes using the Geriatric Mental State (GMS) diagnostic interview, which is administered using a computerized semi-structured interview, the GMS-AGECAT (as cited by Copeland et al, 1988. Golden et al., 2009).

Results from this study suggest there is a strong correlation between loneliness and depressed moods which was higher in those who lived alone and those who were widowers. The authors note that "two-thirds of the population prevalence of depressed mood was associated with loneliness, and among those who were lonely over 80% of the risk of depressed mood was attributable to their loneliness" (Golden et al., pg. 699).

Further studies suggest that lack of social networks is a consistent predictor of loneliness. In a longitudinal study from 1990-2008 community dwellers aged 70, 78, and 85 showed higher rates of loneliness, specifically in men. Strongest indicators were whether or not one is partnered or living alone (Iecovich, Jacobs & Stessman, 2011, p. 243). These same results have been shown to lead to higher rates of mortality with numerous studies accounting that loneliness, depression, and emotional distress are directly linked to increases in mortality rates (Fenster-Ehrlich 2007; Koenig, George, Larson, McCullough, Branch, & Kuchibhatla 1999; Patterson & Veenstra, 2010; Reblin & Uchino 2008; Uchino, 2006; Weill & Rother, 1998-1999; Wilson & Moulton, 2010).

The research seems clear, when people are secluded from society they overwhelmingly experience loneliness, isolation and often depression which leads to a higher rate of mortality. However, when viewed through a critical gerontological lens this I find myself asking: Is loneliness, isolation and depression due to a lack of social networking or is it driven more by a

culture that wears down one's sense of well-being and inflicts ageism onto those who have lived longer than most, otherwise known as *identity stripping* (Gullette, 1997, p.8). If we are to consider the impact society has on one's aging process then we must take into account the message our culture gives to older adults, otherwise known as *age ideology*. Gullette describes age ideology below:

Age ideology doesn't just provide the toxic atmosphere we breathe, it puts a nose on your face that in the mirror you can't tell from your own; it puts ugly interpretations into your head that your eyes then seem to see; it calls these distortions nature. (Gullette, 1997, p.13)

As members of our own culture we are born and raised into a beautified society that honors youthfulness and encourages us to mask our aging process. This raises the thought that perhaps a decline in social networking has more to do with a loss of autonomy and personhood in an older humans' life as they face mainstream society's view on aging. This led me in my research process to look at personhood and how one's personhood or lack thereof, contributes to their quality or meaning of life.

## **Personhood**

When we think about personhood it is important to remember that personhood includes all the connections people make with being alive. These traits include "personality, character, a past, life experiences, family, cultural background, roles, relationships with others, relationships with self, political being, unconscious (aspects of self-outside of awareness), habitual behaviors, a secret life, a perceived future, a transcendent dimension, a body" (Berzoff & Silverman, 2004, p. 26-27). I became curious about the relationship between social isolation and personhood when I began to think about how our mainstream culture views older adults in our society.

Bioethicist Bowyer (2014) discusses the exploration of what it means to be human. Working from the hermeneutic-phenomenology ideas of Martin Heidegger she suggests “autonomy is about responding appropriately to others with whom we share a world” (p.139). Furthermore, it is Bowyer’s believes that “as embodied, relational beings our activity emerges through and is supported by our worldly interactions in a way that enables us to make sense of ourselves and the things we do” (p.141). That said one must ask: how does one’s personal identity with the self and others change as we move into later life? As one ages is social isolation more apt to occur because of their identity being stripped causing constant changes in personhood and a faltering sense of autonomy and not because one is simply growing older? If true than our work is to “not blame...aging [per se, but instead] ...blame the economy or age discrimination or some other cause” (Gullette, 1997, p. 215).

The reason one might become socially isolated as they age is complex and there is certainly no one answer, however, it does seem that being engaged with others in community is a proven way to combat isolation and the effects it has on one’s aging self. In the next section I look at social participation, how it may effect one’s social identity, and how living and working in an intentional environment has impacted the lives of people from all generations.

### **Social Participation**

The need for researchers to better understand an older adult’s experience within a community and what impact it has on their lives is of great importance. In a 2015 study Goll, Charlesworth, Scior & Stott, talked about some of the more obvious precursors to a decrease in social participation: “higher age, illness/disability, lower socioeconomic status, and ethnic minority status” (p.2). However, they also called for further research needing to be done around the subjective experience older adults’ face and additional barriers to social participation they



encounter which includes: “perceived danger in the neighborhood, ageism, lack of finances, lack of confidence, lack of opportunities that support preferred identities, and difficulties adapting to ageing” (p.2). Goll et al’s study aimed to examine the relationship between social participation and social identity among independent older adults living alone in a London community. Major findings were, “participants responded to barriers not by seeking new and accessible social opportunities, but by psychologically minimizing the challenges of loneliness, avoiding social opportunities, and attempting to cope alone” (p.12). Findings like these further the argument that some older adults face an identity crisis as they age. Goll et al. (2015) suggests that often people try to uphold a more youthful appearance due to fears that they will be seen as old which may be perceived as one who is dependent and/or decrepit (p.13).

These results indicate that if older adults live in a community where they feel safe and valued, they will be more apt to engage with their neighbors, family and friends. Furthermore, promoting interdependent relationships rather than independent ones “allows people to offer work and resources to their communities that match their interests, resources and capabilities, while at the same time affirming that everyone is fundamentally of equal worth, and that each contribution is important” (Rios & Rios, 2015, p.39).

Due to mounting evidence that intergenerational relationships in community are creating healthier living situations we are now witnessing “communities...starting to include social and institutional policies, cultural and community practices, and environmental design endeavors that aim to promote intergenerational engagement” (Kaplan et al., 2006, p.407). One such model is the Intentional Intergenerational Community (IIC) movement which is growing in popularity as independent life styles are challenged by the cost of living, a rapid spike in aging boomers, single

parenting at an all-time high, and other barriers. Rios, a consultant for said communities, shares a story of one IIC where the ratio is 3 children to 10 adults:

This community seems pretty happy and relaxed raising young kids, especially in comparison to the couples and single parents I know who are raising children outside of intentional communities, hurriedly getting them off to daycare and schools in order to earn enough money to make ends meet. By increasing the ratio of adults to children and sharing resources, no one has to work too much, and their ecological footprint decreases along with the work load. (Rios & Rios, 2015, p.39)

### **Intentional Intergenerational Communities**

Interest in Intentional Intergenerational communities has wavered throughout American history. They became extremely popular in the early sixties to mid-seventies but by the early eighties many communities fell silent. Since then popularity in these communities has regained some steam beginning in the early 1990's and has continually gained interest with an extended amount of growth from 2005 to 2007 (Schaub, 2015, p.6). Today many of the IICs are focused on issues like caring for the environment and addressing social issues. It is common place that members share a common vision and values. The success of said communities measured by the member's happiness is gaining the attention of people from all walks of life and from all over the world. They are addressing many social issues or ways of life that the community at large is not able to or has yet to embrace.

As the number of intergenerational models grows, so do the benefits. Macnamara (2015) talks about integrating different generations with a developmental approach to aging called *phases*. "Phases [offer] different approaches to learning about the self and the world, as well as

different perspectives...The child is about growth, the apprentice about searching and experimenting, the adult about doing, being decisive and productive, and the elder is reflective” (p.18). Without this inner web of connection through the ages (or phases) we become segregated in our age groups: “Children are isolated within their age groups at schools, elderly people are alone in homes, the apprentice stage is being eroded, and adults are lacking in support” (Macnamara, 2015, p.18). Fragmented generations who are trying to live independently of one another often result in older adults facing isolation in some institutional style setting due to the high cost of care later in life. By living an intergenerational approach, communities are experiencing profound changes such as “increase in safety, healthier environments, and improved recreational facilities” (as cited by Generations United, 2002. Kaplan et al., 2006, p.408). And although older adults are less likely to contribute by doing physical activities like shoveling snow, they are great resources when it comes to “research, meditation, problem solving and committee work” (Schaub, 2015, p.16).

One such design of IIC living is the trifecta: Hope Meadows, Treehouse Foundation and Bridge Meadows. The focus of these communities is to provide safe housing and long term support for foster children. The first, Hope Meadows (in Rantoul, Illinois) is the oldest community and opened its doors in 1994, followed by The Treehouse Community (in Easthampton, Massachusetts) in 2002, and Bridge Meadows (in Portland, Oregon) which has been operational since 2011. Even though the primary focus of these communities are the foster children, the older adult residents bring a richness to the community that would not be possible if it wasn't for their presence. According to Hoppings (as cited by Smith, 2001), a sociologist from the University of Illinois,

This strategy of combining three or more generations of kinlike support in a secure and welcoming neighborhood has paid off in several ways...seniors have a safe and affordable place to live, families at last receive adequate support for the often overwhelming task of providing foster care to ‘special needs’ children, and foster children find an end to (or even avoid) a long series of temporary placements and painful disruptions. (Smith, 2001, p. 17)

In addition, residents of Hope Meadows report that foster grandparents tend to “succeed in reaching out the troubled youngsters...simply because they open their hearts to them without qualification” (Smith, p.58).

News of Hope Meadows’ success began to spread and soon the concept had caught the eye of Boston area mother Judy Cockerton. A former teacher and toy-shop owner, Cockerton became passionate about wanting to make a difference in the lives of the children who were living in the foster care system after reading an article in her local newspaper about a local infant in the foster care system who had gone missing. Driven to do more than becoming a foster parent, Cockerton took the inspiration of the Hope Meadow concept and began dreaming of starting a community similar to the Illinois model (MacQuarrie, 2015). The difference is: this community would nestle at the base of Mt. Tom in western Massachusetts and she called it Treehouse.

### **The Treehouse Community**

The Treehouse Community is a community with 60 homes nestled in the small town of Easthampton, MA. Treehouse opened its door in 2006 and since that time “61 children have arrived directly from foster care or with adoptive families. None of them have dropped out of school; there have been no teenage pregnancies, and all 16 children who applied for college have

been accepted” (MacQuarrie, 2015). In total there are over 100 people who reside there and they range in age from 3 to 90 (Cockerton, 2008). In the quarterly newsletter Cockerton writes, “at treehouse we seek to find out what it takes for neighborhoods to become truly invested in the loves of all of its community members...we invite [everyone] to step forward and contribute to the Treehouse mission and vision.” (p.1). Again, it appears that this intergenerational approach is wildly successful for those who are committed to Cockerton’s mission. In a 2015 article in the Boston Globe, resident Pam Hanson described her experience as a member of the Treehouse community (MacQuarrie, 2015, December 21). “There is an innate kindness and respectfulness that you just don’t see anywhere,” Hanson said. “I feel in love with the place — not just the physical place, but the idea of being older but not yet dead”. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/12/20/village-raise-adopted-foster-children/GoqaPeIrxsZieXd39YMPkM/story.html>

In March through December of 2012, a study was conducted at the Treehouse Community. Dolan and Grotevant (2014) gathered information from a limited number of older adult residents, nine out of the fifty, who participated in a series of interviews. The goal was to gain a better understanding from the perspective of the community members on what the strengths and challenges were in the community during its first six years of operation (p.7). While older adults reported feelings of a deeper commitment to their lives and to their community since they joined the community there were also reports that some older adults did too much while others rarely engaged causing resentment from some of the interviewees (Dolan & Grotevant, p.15). Outcomes from these interviews raised the following questions: How do older adults in *The Treehouse Community* make meaning in their everyday lives?; How is life spent in the community compared to life before moving to the community?; and How do the

meaningful activities older adults engage in their daily lives impact or influence other community members?

According to Dolan and Grotevant (2014), the mission of Treehouse is “to bring children, families, and older adults together in an economically and culturally diverse community grounded in supportive and respectful relationships” (p. 5). The results have been consistent with those from Hope Meadows in that families feel more supported, children feel safe and loved, and older adults interviewed expressed, “meaning and fulfillment in their lives as a result of [their] involvement” (Dolan & Grotevant, p.14).

### **Summary**

While this research helps us to understand the importance of intergenerational relationships in the lives of children and their families, there is little research about how the older adults in the community describe their experiences and the impact living in an intentional community with adopted foster children and their families has made in their lives. As I will describe below, by discussing their experiences in both a community forum and one-on-one personal interviews the aim of this study hopes to address the everyday felt experiences the oldest members of this community are experiencing and whether or not living in such a community adds meaning to their lives.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I begin by describing the methodological design for my study. First, I discuss the use of combining both flexible and participatory research in my approach. I then discuss how such an approach has challenged what we know as the normative positivist approach to human sciences research and practice. This will be followed by a discussion about the ways in which the critical gerontology perspective informs practice. By using flexible research, participatory research and critical gerontology in my work I was able to collaborate with the oldest members of the Treehouse Community who graciously shared their life stories with me over these past months. Finally, I have listed the principles used in my approach, why I chose to use them and the questions that emerged from such an approach.

#### **Methodological Design**

The methodological design I used for this study combined qualitative, flexible methods and a participatory action research approach. I chose these approaches in combination because of the foundational principles of each approach, which I will discuss in more detail below. One principle that these two approaches hold in common which is important to state explicitly is that they challenge the normative positivist approach to human sciences research and practice.

Flexible methods and participatory action research differs from positivism in that I, like so many others, challenge the normative positivist approach by recognizing that progress, whether it be in knowledge or social structure, is made up by the very lives of those who are living within that structure and not by those who are observing it. Malhotra- Bentz & Shapiro (1998) write, “Almost every social arrangement, whether an entire society, an organization, a

town, or a social group, has some set of ideas that justify or rationalize or legitimate it” (pg. 185). Positivists believe that through observation we can determine theory which then turns into knowledge and ultimately facts. Yet what is fact? Specifically, in this instance when the very subjects I am studying are members of our society who have lived longer than most, who is to say what is factual and what is not when it comes to their lived experiences? For the purpose of my research I will ask those I am studying what is it like to live in an intentional intergenerational community at this particular moment in their life? To do otherwise would be to invite social constructionism into my research which, by definition, is for humans to be aged by culture first and not by ones’ own lived experience (Gullette 1997, pg.3). By using both flexible methods and participatory action research, I defend the self by inviting the oldest members of the Treehouse Community to share from their own wisdom what it is to make meaning in their lives.

**Flexible methods:** Anastas (1999) describes “flexible methods research as an unstructured data which is used in order to capture the phenomena of interest in the words or actions of those who embody or live them and to capture them in context in terms that are as ‘experience-near’ as possible” (pg. 57). By using a flexible method I was able to explore emerging themes by collecting qualitative data. In addition, particular attention was paid not only to the verbal response a participant makes, but also in the actions and embodied experience one has during the interview process. With flexible method research, when people’s own words and behavior are used in order to capture one’s motives and beliefs there is a deeper sense of meaning for both the participant and the researcher (Anastas, 1999, pg. 57). By using a flexible method approach, the study aimed to answer: How do elders living in The Treehouse Community together with foster children and their families continue or expand the quality of meaning making in their everyday lives?



**Participatory action research:** I believe that a participant action research approach couples well with the flexible methods model. This methodology furthers my research commitment to celebrate the experience of older adults by allowing their voices to rise above those who may define the value of meaning making and activity differently. As Schwandt (2007) describes, “Participatory action research (PAR) objective is to produce both useful knowledge and action as well as consciousness raising-empowering people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge” (p. 221). Typically research is gathered through observation, questions and experiments designed by the researcher. However, when the researcher is able to “hold lightly the conceptual frame from which they started so that they are able to see how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.180). The process of inquiry becomes more organic in nature allowing the participant to lead the researcher and themselves down a truer path of their own true knowledge gained by way of personal experience thereby developing a deeper understanding of the participants own lived experience. With this approach the participant becomes a co-facilitator in the research project itself. By using Participatory action research the research performed is “with the people rather than on the people” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.179).

### **Sample**

A purposive, snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants for both the instrument development focus group and the symposium. The major criterion for participating in this study is only that the participant is an elder who lives or volunteers at the Treehouse Community in Easthampton, Massachusetts.

**Symposium participants:** Out of 56 elders who live at The Treehouse Community 10 elders participated in either the symposium or a one-on-one interview. 9 female and 1 male, all

members are white. The symposium was advertised in the Treehouse Community newsletters along with fliers (Appendix A) which were distributed at community events and posters which were displayed in common areas. The only criterion for attending the event was that the participant was an elder who lived at The Treehouse Community. Every attempt was made to recruit a diverse sample of participants and one-on-one interviews were offered to elders who were not available the day of the symposium or felt more comfortable meeting one-on-one. The symposium lasted for two hours and each interview lasted approximately one hour.

### **Interview Guide: Process of Development**

I began by working with a focus group of four female elders who identify as white and live at Treehouse. After participants of the focus group were identified, focus group members were contacted by phone or e-mail (Appendix B) to schedule a time when the group could meet. In this e-mail I explained the key elements of my study including the purpose of the focus group and the role that expert gerontologist Dr. Jennifer Sasser, would play. Furthermore, I explained that Dr. Sasser will serve as a co-facilitator at the symposium event. By incorporating Dr. Sasser into our work the researcher's goal was to offer a goodwill gesture to the group which helped build confidence within the focus group that the researcher is committed to using a participatory research approach for this project. Once I received verbal consent, a date and time was selected for all members of the focus group and the researcher to meet at the Treehouse Community Center.

The meeting between the researcher and the focus group was held in a private room at The Treehouse Community Center. At the start of our meeting all members of the focus group were handed consent forms, (Appendix C) which outlined the purpose of the research, potential risks (i.e. feeling uncomfortable providing negative or divergent experiences), benefits of the

study, and possible uses of the information in the future. Participants were assured of their confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study any time before April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016. No monetary compensation or incentives of any kind were offered to the subjects for their participation. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants', all information pertaining to their personal information, was safeguarded through the use of a locked file cabinet.

**Questions:** With the permission of the focus group, our meeting was conducted using an audio recorder to capture the in depth conversation. The audio recording was then shared with Dr. Sasser. Focus group members were given a few open ended questions to start off the group discussion. The goal of the focus group was to develop, plan and design the theme and questions that were presented at the symposium which was a community event that was held three weeks later and was open to all elders who live at The Treehouse Community. An informal and unstructured interview was conducted. We began by reviewing a list of questions to use as a guide about topics to cover and areas in which the researcher thought were important to explore. However, ultimately the goal was to allow the participants of the focus group to direct the conversation, which they did. The questions posed to the group were as followed:

1. What were some of the reasons you decided to join the community?
2. What has your experience of becoming a part of the Treehouse Community been like?
3. How does life spent at The Treehouse Foundation (THF) compare to life before moving to the community?
4. What do you enjoy most about being a part of this community?
5. What do you find to be the most challenging?
6. What does it take to fall in love with being alive?

Several themes that emerged through the group conversation were used to format the symposium. Both Dr. Sasser and I, the researcher, reviewed the audio tape, discussed emerging themes we both recognized and then made recommendations to the focus group about an overarching theme for the day and a specific direction that both I, the researcher, and Dr. Sasser felt were relevant to the lives of the elders at The Treehouse Community. The members of the focus group reviewed our ideas, made adjustments to which they all agreed upon and returned their conclusions to the researcher to use during the symposium. The formation of the symposium topics was shared and discussed among the focus group, the researcher, and Dr. Sasser via e-mail (Appendix D).

### **Data Collection**

The Smith College for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee approved this study (Appendix E). Participants of the study participated in an open dialogue event called a symposium. The symposium was held at the Community Center at The Treehouse in the main area. This is an exploratory study and all participants received the same treatment.

**Consent forms:** Upon entry all elders were handed consent forms, which were identical to the focus group forms (Appendix C). Each participant was given a name tag and asked to use a first name only for identification purposes. The name, real or pseudonym, was worn on the upper part of their body and was large enough to be seen. The purpose of the name tag was to identify the speaker.

**Confidentiality:** Participants were assured of their confidentiality. No monetary compensation or incentives of any kind were offered to the subjects for their participation. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, all information pertaining to their personal identity, was safeguarded through the use of a locked file cabinet.

**Withdrawal from the study:** All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study any time before April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

**Risks and benefits:** This research project benefits the researcher, the subjects and the field of social work. First and foremost by completing this research project the researcher is satisfying one of her commitments needed in order to obtain her degree as an MSW. Also, the researcher learned a great amount of detail on how IICs benefit multiple generations and inter-dependent lifestyles and the importance relationships like those found at Treehouse have on a healthy life-style at any age. Participants benefited by way of taking the opportunity to share their experiences with peers and having the opportunity to hear others' experiences. Hopefully the participants gained satisfaction in knowing that their stories will contribute to future research services to support the intentional intergenerational housing movement which supports foster children, families and elders. For the field of social work it helps to better understand research from the perspective of the elder. By bearing witness to the stories and experiences our elders share we the social worker are better prepared to support our elders from issues like isolation, loneliness, depression, ageism and other damaging stereotypes that are fed to our mainstream culture. Finally, the consent forms outlined the purpose of the research which included the potential risks of feeling uncomfortable providing negative or divergent experiences.

**Symposium and one-on-one procedures:** The theme of the symposium drew directly from the words of the 4th century b.c. philosopher Plato who described a *symposium* as “dealing with ideal love and the vision of absolute beauty” (retrieved from, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/symposium>). The symposium was a two hour event and offered participants to share their experiences, thoughts and ideas about how they create meaning in their lives as a resident of The Treehouse Community. The following questions were asked of

each participant during the symposium. For those who were unable to attend the symposium or preferred a one-to-one venue additional times were arranged for those meetings and the same questions were asked.

1. What brought you to Treehouse?
2. How long have you been here?
3. Who are you, what brings meaning to you in the world?

After we went around the room with the questions provided above we returned to the group and asked them each to reflect and respond to the final two questions:

1. Reflect on an experience as a member of the Treehouse community when you challenged your comfort level and stepped out of your box to do something to help another.
2. What gave you the courage to take the risk to step out of your comfort zone to help another? What seemed to work about what you did and what was challenging or would you change?

During the symposium the only non-residents were myself and Dr. Sasser. The event was audiotaped and Dr. Sasser also signed a confidentiality form (Appendix F). At the conclusion of the event all participants were asked to complete an evaluation form (Appendix G). For the five one-on-one interviews that were conducted the same process was used. All members signed a consent form and were given an evaluation form to complete and return at their convenience.

### **Data Analysis**

I used a discourse analysis approach when analyzing my data. Schwandt (2007) explains “Discourse analysis as an interdisciplinary approach drawing insights from ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics, cognitive psychology, communication studies, and ordinary language

philosophy. It is principally concerned with the analysis of the process of communication itself.” (p.73). The data collected was manually analyzed paying particular attention to themes, actions and behaviors that emerged from both the participants who participated at the symposium and the one-on-one interviews. I paid particular attention to the activities present within each participant individually and within the group dynamic. Reason & Bradbury (2001) define such inquiry as group-based inquiry, “All the action phases occur when the whole group is together in the same place, but some phases may involve each person doing their own individual activity side-by-side with everyone else; or they may be paired or small group activities done side-by-side” (p.182). As themes emerged, I the researcher, continuously challenged myself, co-facilitator Dr. Sasser and the participants of the study to use the reflexivity process to examine any assumptions or preconceptions we may have and discuss how those thoughts and ideas may or may not affect the dynamics of our work retrieved from, (<http://www.utoronto.ca/~pchsiung/LAL/reflexivity>). This type of analysis stays true to the PAR approach the researcher is committed to using.

As I move into the next chapter the findings discussed are based on five major themes that emerged throughout the group process. I listened to the audio recordings from both the symposium and one-on-one interviews multiple times, sharing my notes with Dr. Sasser who then reviewed and we discussed the major themes that emerged.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

In this study, I explored the experiences of some of older adults who live at The Treehouse Community, an intentional intergenerational community, located in Easthampton, MA. I conducted a symposium event in conjunction with Dr. Jennifer Sasser, a well-known and reputable gerontologist currently working in Portland, Oregon. I also held five qualitative interviews with elders of the community who were not able to attend the symposium. In total, there were five members who attended the symposium and five other people who participated in one-on-one interviews. All participants were aged sixty-five or older. Nine were female, and all identified as “white.” Their stories expressed a variety of experiences on an assortment of themes; all of which seem to add to the significance and understanding of why elders who live at The Treehouse Community continue to live full and meaningful lives.

Throughout my data collecting process, I paid particular attention to the participatory approach which I was committed to for this research project. I examined the data I gathered through a thematic analysis approach to qualitative data. Throughout this discussion of my findings I will use the words “interviewees,” “participants,” “residents,” and “members” interchangeably to describe the older adults whom I interviewed.

#### **Lived Experience**

Because these elders arrived at The Treehouse Community later in life, each one of them has brought a wealth of experience and knowledge. Most had interesting careers prior to their arrival bringing a richness to the community that seems only possible when you add the wisdom of the longest lived members of society. Out of all the members interviewed, four of them have



lived at Treehouse since the beginning of the community ten years ago. Three have lived there for eight years, one for four years and two have lived there for a little over three years.

### **Life before Treehouse**

Prior to moving to the Treehouse community, the interviewees participated in social justice movements large and small. There is a thrilling and vibrant scent in the air when it comes to this group. As one participant said, “The experience of aging, seen from our own travels, builds resilience in how we engage in our own lives.” Many have traveled extensively and have done so in a variety of ways and for various reasons. One member traveled by foot, walking across the country with Peace Pilgrim, Mildred Lisette Norman. Another traveled the country for a number of years in a motor-home with a trusty pet, and another took a journey across the country moments before settling down at Treehouse. One member talked about their extensive world travels and their own work on social justice issues in countries like Rwanda. Another, a professor of International Studies, has spent much of her life time promoting peace all around the world. Every participant I interviewed has spent some time volunteering for the greater good in their area of passion.

The group is not only well equipped in empathy; they are also well educated. Seven out of ten are college educated, two hold doctorates, two hold master’s degrees, and three have undergraduate degrees. The group’s previous livelihoods include teaching, psychotherapy, social work, and hospice. Several have written books, been homemakers, and eight spent significant time in their younger years working directly with older adults or people with disabilities. In addition, four participants organized and ran non-profit organizations, two of them more than once. The skills some of the oldest residents bring to the community continue to nurture that environment. One member arrived as a talented grant writer. Not only was this resident

responsible for much of the funding Treehouse has received through grants, but has also taught the skill to other Treehouse staff members who now do much of the grant writing for the Treehouse Foundation. Whether it is by networking, public speaking, participating as a board member, or just by taking the news about the Treehouse Community out to the larger world, the skills brought by residents continue to help it flourish. According to one resident, “this place is great and I want everyone to know about it.” These folks have strived for individual and community betterment and combined bringing a rich tapestry of experiences to the Treehouse Community.

Participants offered numerous reasons about why they chose to live at Treehouse. Two members lived in co-housing communities prior to coming to Treehouse, a few followed friends who were moving to the community, and others had read about Treehouse in their local newspaper or had attended a presentation about it at a neighborhood church. When asked what attracted them to Treehouse one participant said, “It just seemed to be the next step on my path. It was a time in my life when I needed to stop collecting “things,” and move to creating an inward life.”

Participants of this study shared several common interests, among them, compassion for other people. This group’s hunger for social justice and a willingness to do something about it permeates the lives of the participants. The common thread seemed to be their focus on folks who were aging and may have had additional challenges such as disabilities. Another theme that emerged is the need to give back or share their own stories of strength and flexibility from past challenges. As one resident shared, “My identification with my own story brought me here. I know what it’s like to go through these difficult issues. I have resilience and I wanted to share my skills.” Participants talked about wanting to be part of an intergenerational community that

strives for something much bigger than a neighborhood. One member said “I wanted children in my life,” while another proclaimed, “I came here because I didn’t want to hang around with a bunch of old folks.”

Clearly, a major influence in the participants’ lives was a desire to help the children who had fallen victim to a broken foster care system. As one resident explained, “My understanding and appeal was that there were kids here who had really hard upbringings and that they were getting help and support here.” As another explained:

The concept was great because it was something that was reaching out to foster children. It is a beautiful concept and I want to be a part of it. I knew from all the reading that I do that the foster care system in this country was in trouble. I loved the idea of this community. I was living in an apartment and had downsized. I was drawn because it was a community and there were people older here too. I was single, it felt safe and it was close to everything I love.

After spending a bit of time with these particular residents of the Treehouse Community, I found one thing perfectly clear: they did not show up there looking for something to do with their lives. These people are busy, and they have been busy all of their lives.

### **Life at Treehouse**

For members who have been living at the Treehouse for the last eight to ten years, their perspective spans the life of the community. All long term residents talk about the growing up process that Treehouse has gone through. When the doors first opened at Treehouse the property management company had to fill the units. The focus then was less on filling the units with residents who were dedicated to the intergenerational community model and more about financial obligation. This meant filling the units to pay the bills. This was problematic for older

residents and continues to pose a challenge at times. That said, one resident had a take on the situation which was unique from all the others:

I expected to be among people who were about being in community; maybe had a spiritual meaning about what community meant. But because they were more focused on filling up the apartments, being a part of the community was not a main priority to some folks. Some didn't have a clue what it was like to be in community and so it was very difficult. But in hindsight it was wonderful. It created not an intentional community at all but a "slice of life" community. People had to learn to get along and learn how to be in community. In the beginning it was disastrous and the meetings were nasty.

There were so many opinions and diversity, levels of interest and involvement.

A staff member later explained to me that developing The Treehouse Community has happened through trial and error and this complex situation is evident when talking to the residents. Treehouse is growing older just like its inhabitants. The hours of hard work and dedication the residents and staff have donated shows up when talking to these community members. Residents use descriptive words like "grow," "more organized," and "seasoned." One resident explains "It did not happen quickly but now you see it everywhere. Now you see people who love being here." One improvement noticed and commented on is the practice of screening potential members. One called it "scrutinizing," while another told me "I don't think it's as gossipy now."

Safety, inclusion, and acceptance were popular topics of conversation with nearly everyone. All ten agreed that they feel safe in the community. One resident commented that in their opinion, "It's a good environment, and I like it...I'm glad I'm here." The conversation

during the symposium and two of the interviews also included stories of the children at Treehouse. At Treehouse, the residents said, children are accepted and treated more as equals. The kids know that the Treehouse Community exists because of them. They know that every adult at Treehouse is there to support them and because of that they are growing up in an environment that is likely very different than the world outside of this unique place.

The sense of inclusion and safety comes from the connections made throughout this community. While the connections between older adults and children are talked about often with this group, there are also the strong connections that exist between older adults and parents, older adult to each other, and especially those between the kids. One member pointed out, “The parents here are just like parents in any neighborhood. They need to learn how to trust you and make sure you aren’t going to disrupt their family’s lives. I think people forget that.” While another admitted “I seem to focus on connecting with the children. I connect with the kids before I connect with their parents.” Such statements seem to suggest that parents at Treehouse are diligent about their children’s welfare just like in any other community, but also there is perhaps some relief because of the reputations of the older adults within the community. Some participants suggested that it is their shared experience of being in the foster care system that brings a sort of unity and cohesion with their young neighborhood friends.

Another positive outcome for many living at Treehouse is a sense of purpose and a love of learning. The Treehouse Community offers on-going educational opportunities to all residents and the surrounding community on subjects like trauma and substance abuse. In addition, they have a long list of classes that are taught by people inside and outside of the community. One participant runs a very popular program semi-monthly with the children. It’s called, *The Treehouse Café*. Here the children are learning real life skills. They designed and maintain a

website and book local musicians to play there. They create the menu, then prepare and serve the food. The children are responsible for the money and use it to fund other projects at Treehouse. During the symposium group's conversation about the café, the resident who has been an intricate part of the development, planning and production of the café beamed with pride as others raved over the success. One member proudly exclaimed, "The children are learning hands-on entrepreneurial skills that will last them a life time!" Along with the café, older adults host a variety of activities at the popular Treehouse center. Here they host Peace Team meetings, where a handful of members are creating an intergenerational choir complete with songbooks designed by the choir organizers. There are mindfulness classes, monthly tea parties, and a new group called "The Gift." The Gift is a space where, in the words of one member, "you confront your own mortality." Members of the group discuss end-of-life issues and most importantly create a safe space for people to do this.

### **The Future of Treehouse**

One of the more complicated questions the oldest members of the Treehouse community face is what does the future look like for older adults living at Treehouse? Will they be able to "age in place"? In fact, one of the more popular conversations that occurred with both the symposium group and those who participated in the one-on-one interviews was: Do you think it will ever be possible for older adults to age in place at Treehouse? According to those interviewed, the topic has been talked about extensively. Some talked about the philosophy of The Treehouse Foundation and how it does not accommodate the need for frail residents or that the focus has always been about the children and not the older adults. As one participant said

It is not part of the philosophy to take care of the seniors to death. The philosophy is to take care of the kids and give them permanency. If it was a

true sense of community they would take care of you until death. That bothers me. It is more transient with the seniors here. I think that interferes with the ability to build the history of the Treehouse. I don't think people like it but we are starting to understand that the seniors are now just as big a part of the community as the kids.

For the most part the question prompted more unanswered questions. Out of the ten interviewed, five residents agreed it was not a possibility either because of the Treehouse philosophy, the way the foundation was originally set-up, or the original way the units are designed. Three members talked about the possibility of sponsoring fundraisers to raise money and awareness around the growing need to provide additional resources for older adults to age in their homes at Treehouse. Other ideas were to perhaps look into changing the housing requirements from middle income housing to income based housing. There was also talk about the possibility of older adults living with older children who have aged out of the foster care system but are still very much a part of the community. Interviewees feel there is still a lot the community needs to do to be more inclusive but struggle to find answers. There is one thing for certain, all interviewees expressed heartbreak that they will one day have to leave or watch somebody they love have to go. As one resident said "I don't know how we would do it. We talk about it, and then in the meantime people have to leave."

Historically, there has been one resident who left to move to a higher level of care. Residents shared that they are still very involved with her life and they often go and pick her up to go to different events being held at Treehouse or in the local community. Many participants shared their concerns for a current resident who is struggling with medical issues. Thus far their solution has been to create a schedule to check in on the resident and help in any way they can.

Four out of the five members who were interviewed individually talked about this resident in a deeply personal and loving manner, showing me that the residents at Treehouse tend to be much more than neighbors -- they are family.

### **Relationships**

Overwhelmingly the participants of the study expressed deep feelings of gratitude for the relationships they have with their Treehouse neighbors. All participants had positive things to say about the relationship building that takes place there. All interviewees agreed on a shared feeling that they are all one family. One person said, "People are very friendly and helpful here. We help one another and take care of one another. It's like family. You might not necessarily like all your family but they are still your family."

When these members talked about their Treehouse family words like "giving," "caring," "feeling part of a whole" and "feeling held" were used. A common philosophy from the group is that when you are caring and giving to others it increases your capacity to love and to accept more love. Another member said, "I believe because people here are living fuller lives they are nicer to one another, more considerate." One interviewee described the feeling of being extra cared for by the little gestures that are felt throughout the community. For instance, someone left a catnip plant on her front porch for her cat. Another described the family who stops by daily to take her dog for a walk. One resident shared a memory about a time when she was very ill, on reflection she stated, "People were bringing me healthy vegetarian meals, they would pick-up my groceries, take out the trash and just check in." Additional comments made were, "Giving and caring: It is more blessed and joyous to give to others"; "There's a sense of being "held" here (at Treehouse) I feel more loved, etc. cared for and safe"; "My ability to give and care has increased by being at Treehouse. This allows me to be more giving, more cheerful. We are part of a whole



we feel cared for.” And finally, “Kids learn by example. They learn by watching others. So they learn how to be because we are so giving.”

There is a fluidity to the way members define the word “family” here. It seems to have meaning in non-traditional ways. While interviewing the residents many of them talked about the feeling of a sisterhood they have created with other residents. Their love and commitment was not only expressed through words but also by the way they talked about one another. The interviewees share a great amount of respect for one another and that shows in the way they talk about and to each another. In one interview we talked in great detail about the history three women here at Treehouse share. Over the years they have ventured off on grand adventures creating wonderful memories along the way. As the resident and I spoke I could feel the love and respect this woman had for the other two, this led to additional questioning about how these strong bonds that have been created over time influence or intimidate newer members of the Treehouse community. We will explore this question a little more later on in my findings.

Another interesting outcome from the research was the unusual friendships that have developed at Treehouse. Keep in mind that ten years ago when this community started the focus was on filling the units. Sure there was a vision to support the families and the children but first and foremost they had to pay the bills, therefore many of the new tenants arrived due to low rents and not because of the Treehouse mission, not all newcomers were familiar with living a communal lifestyle. This led to unusual relationships forming and as one resident put it:

I love all the people. Because of this slice of life community setting I have met people I would have never met in a million years. We have no similar interest but eventually you find familiarity within one another, relationships naturally grow. Common humanity brings us together.

This “slice of life community,” as they call it, has also led to people learning to value one another in different ways. As one resident shared, “meaning is very different yet I have learned to value people on many different levels. Some have meaning in domestic work, or raising kids, that is different for me but it has been a real learning experience and I have a real expanding of my heart.”

### **The Children**

The ability to learn from people with a diverse set of backgrounds and varied histories does not stop within a generation. Older adults at Treehouse also share numerous stories and examples of how the children at Treehouse engage with all members of the community. At Treehouse children are valued. The kids learn from example on how to treat others in the world and through their learning they also teach. One resident shared with me the lessons working with two of the children taught her: “I learned a lot from the kids, I learned to just be with them. I no longer needed to learn how to be patient; that was not the problem. I just learned how to be.”

Children at Treehouse are described as “phenomenal,” “very polite,” “good,” “wonderful,” “well-behaved” and “awesome.” Here children are encouraged to interact with everyone and they know everyone here is to support them and their upbringing. One interviewee even went as far to say that prior to moving here they would drive around Treehouse, trying to get a feel for the place and the children were all so pleasant, “it was almost as if they were Stepford children.” Not all of the interviewees have as much time to spend with the children. However, one member said, “even though I don’t have direct contact with the kids due to my schedule, I do check in and again, they are my family.”

## **The Staff**

Another branch of the Treehouse family tree is the staff. Residents overwhelmingly praise the dedication these employees bring to their work every day. One resident explained, “From the beginning staff have been respectful and inclusive.” Unanimously the staff is described as “respectful,” “grateful,” “inclusive,” “they honor what we have to offer,” “run with our idea” and “they do a lot of work to make sure that people who are here get what they need.” One resident shared an experience when a staff member went the extra mile to help figure out a problem they were having with the housing authority. The resident explains, “I was paying more for my housing costs and I didn’t know why, this staff member really stepped up and helped me out, it took a lot of worry off my mind.”

As I witnessed the relationships between staff and residents I also saw a good amount of knowledge and understanding about what the needs are inside and outside of the community by the staff members. My observation was later confirmed when a resident talked about the ambassador Treehouse has in the local school system. As explained, Berkshire Family, which is an organization that is affiliated with the Treehouse, hired a representative who knows the laws around children’s rights in the school system. The ambassador frequents the schools advocating for these rights. This single act has made a huge difference in getting the kids the support they need.

## **The Politics of Participation**

One of the more complex subjects that was talked about among both the symposium group and the individual interviews was the number of diverse ways there are to participate and be part of a community. Interviewees debated and discussed various personal theories on what participation looks like in a community like Treehouse. Questions like how do we create

community where all levels of functioning are valued? Does participation require one to engage with others? Is there room for no-participation? (When is being 'inactive' a problem?)

Five of the participants felt strongly about the need for others to participate more while the other five found value and need in having their alone time. Even though they split down the middle in their philosophies around participation, nearly all agreed that they struggle with their own guilt around how much time they spend volunteering in the community and working with the children. Another interesting dynamic was residents who were interviewed acknowledged that there are older adults living in the Treehouse Community that are isolated, however none of those who were identified as isolated were available to confirm that they indeed felt isolated themselves. This leads me to wonder if loneliness is sometimes a presumption that is made when members of a community do not make themselves visible. When interviewing one resident, they commented:

[When you are] living here, if you stay involved that's good. But if you don't you spend a lot of time alone. I like to spend my alone time so that is not such a challenge for me but I know quite a few people who aren't as involved and are at home.

This comment challenges the reader to determine what being at home means in this context. As mentioned previously, the residents interviewed for this study describe their neighbors as family. They look in on one another when they are sick; they walk each other's pets. They know one another; they are invested in their lives and their stories. When they leave, they're never really gone as current residents continue to include them in celebrations, holidays and important events. As a result of these deep and lasting relationships, it is clear there is a great deal of importance in knowing individuals histories. In knowing one's story we are able to reach them in late life as

their functioning begins to change. If this is true, then perhaps when judging whether or not being at home is due to circumstance, need or desire it is best to know the history and personal desires of the person who stays at home. In other words, if we know their stories then perhaps we will know if their being at home is based on desire or something else, such as social isolation.

## **Involvement**

**Welcome to Treehouse:** As previously mentioned people who live at the Treehouse community feel as if they are living among family. Many interviewed have been here for numerous years and the connections they have made with other residents are deep. Knowing this, I asked the interviewees what has it been like for the newer residents; how do they integrate into the community? One participant said:

It's difficult engaging new people into the community (most kids are older now). It's a challenge to continue to organize newcomers, they show up enthusiastic but over time we lose folks because we don't have a good way to integrate them into the existing culture.

Residents interviewed talked about a "welcome wagon" approach they once used. They also had an orientation process but neither one of those practices exist today, now newbies are invited to participate in workshops and trainings, and there is no organized system in which they are welcomed into the community. One member recognizes this issue by saying "nothing really ever got off the ground; this is where we need to do better." Long term residents realize that it is hard to become a part of the community because so many of the residents who have been there a long time have friends and they don't tend to reach out as much as they feel they should or could. This conversation sparked an awareness in one longtime resident. At the end of our interview she stated, "You have made me very aware of inclusion and how to bring people together."

There is a sense of awareness that I have felt from the people interviewed at Treehouse. Maybe it comes from a deeper understanding from their own lived experience or perhaps it comes from the way they approach the world, but it is certainly recognizable in how they talk to one another and about one another. One such example comes from an interview where the person is talking about other people in the community. Here they are commenting on the others' lack of participation within the community

We have a couple younger people here younger than me and they can't do very much for the community because they work all the time. It's okay; they're nice people and nice neighbors. Not everyone can give as much of themselves.

People also feel genuinely good about themselves. Living and working in this community people note that they are proud because they know they are making a difference in this community. As one resident pointed out, "I knew I was doing important work to help that family. It felt like we created a sense of family and a consistency for them." In addition there is a real recognition that they are an important part of change that is happening right before them. They feel included, they know they are important and their ideas matter. As one member put it "the greatest gift is that this is a space where people feel held - whether or not you are having daily visual or vocal communication." That support is felt throughout the members of this study and is clearly evident; yet some still struggle with feelings of guilt about what they can and cannot do. Whether it's from a decline in health, work obligations, or other life's challenges over half of the interviewees grapple with the guilt factor.

### **The Guilt Factor**

Six out of ten community members interviewed have feelings of guilt for not doing enough to support their community. One elder believes this leads to some pushing themselves

beyond their abilities. This conversation led to questions like: *How do we give what we can and not feel guilty about that, what is enough?* And, *is this guilt factor because neighbors become very close and so they want to do more than they are capable of due to feelings of obligation?*

Bigger themes bled into the guilt factor, specifically the need to balance one's life and setting boundaries. All members talked about the assistance they have received from their community members or the staff when they are in need. Thereby allowing them to take time and practice self-care. They also note that setting boundaries with the adults is much easier than setting boundaries with the children. As one resident said:

I'm good at saying no to the adults but with the kids it's much harder. I would project my story on to the kids and think about where they came from and what they had been through and they would want to ask me for something right away and I would want to be there for them. It was like I had no boundaries with them. It was not in the best interest for me or for them. Now I am much better at it.

Modeling good boundaries for better life outcomes was an important outcome. When residents recognized the benefits gained by modeling good boundary setting to the children it reduced feelings of guilt.

Further conversations around boundaries came up often and inevitably they unveiled some members' own personal relationship with aging. Seven members talked candidly about their physical challenges and the importance of accepting their limitations and practicing self-kindness and compassion as these limitations grow. As one resident said, "My own aging process is letting go of what I can do." While another admitted "Since I was diagnosed with health problems a few years ago I have become a lot better at setting boundaries." Another resident has

found a way to accept their limitations through age and stated, “As I grow older I become more accepting of my limitations - not only in relationships (good friends and volunteering) but also with myself. I have found that I am kinder to myself as my limitations grow.”

But for others the struggle to create boundaries is very real. Participants’ comments included: “I feel like a jerk if I don’t do something,” “I use to volunteer a lot more at the center but because of my medical conditions I don’t help like I should, I feel guilty,” “I know it’s important to practice self-care but sometimes I feel guilty that I don’t do enough” and another participant who admits to struggling with the balancing act of stretching their limitations versus risking their health. This leads us to many important questions like: How do we give what we can and not feel guilty about that, what is enough? One possible theory may be that because some residents are very close to one another they don’t want to let one another down so they try to do more than they are capable of or they don’t because they know their limitations but yet they feel guilty about it. It seems to me that those who practice healthy boundaries have less feelings of guilt and are more apt to recognize the benefit of providing a good example to the children by putting their own self-care needs above everything else.

### **Challenges and Struggles**

As this chapter draws to a close I will now move into the final section of my findings - challenges and struggles. Like any community, Treehouse is constantly working towards a more harmonious balance between work, play and fiscal responsibility. Managing a community appears to be very hard work but the staff and members of this community continually approach their work with open hearts and minds and a whole lot of respect.

**Financial barriers.** Some of the larger challenges at Treehouse are the rising costs for housing and upkeep. As one member put it, “we have a housing rental increase about once a



year. They used to hold meetings about the raise hikes but now they just keep happening.” Every member I spoke to commented on the rental hikes - whether it is their own worry or their worry for their neighbor. During the interview process it was common for me to hear stories about people wondering how they were going to pay for medications and other necessities. Symposium participants explained that they have talked diligently about creative solutions like group housing or co-housing for older adults. As one resident said, “It breaks my heart that people want to stay and are really active but they have to leave because of affordability.” Another said “what is sad is if I worked less I could be more available but then I could not afford to live here.”

Because of the financial obligations the property management company, Beacon Properties, was under to fill the units in the early days many people came here with little expectations. What was seen as an opportunity to rent low cost housing has now put some at risk for losing their housing due to rental increases. As one member stated:

This is troublesome. I have never had a lot of money. I will have to leave because of the rising rents. If not, I have to continue working but it's hard.

Treehouse needs to be upfront with people and be honest about that. We need to talk to people about long term care plans early on so they are prepared. I'd like ten years of my life to just relax and rest. I don't think that is too much to ask.

The same resident went on to say “This place is really for people who have retirement money and I didn't realize that coming in. I need to be able to slow down so I can do some writing and not be pressured by having to make enough money.” While most members struggle with the rising costs of housing at Treehouse another finds a sliver of a silver lining. This resident

comments “Kuddos to the Treehouse Foundation, they get a tax break to provide low income housing. Housing is not subsidized here but they will take section 8 vouchers.”

Other concerns that fell under the category of housing and upkeep is maintenance concerns. As some residents pointed out, Beacon Properties tends to have a difficult time keeping a property manager on board. For whatever reason in the recent past there have been five or six different managers on the payroll. It’s not clear, but the high rate of turn over may provide answers to some of the other concerns like burnt out street lights and handicap doors that don’t work properly. As one resident stated, “I think that maintenance does a poor job in running the place.”

**Personal and interpersonal challenges.** Many commented on the struggle they have with balancing volunteer hours with working hours. There were a few members who have had personality conflicts with residents, however most of those residents have now moved away. Another concern was communication between older adults and the parents of the children they were helping with. Many of the interviewees talked about strong relationships with the children but that many of the ties they hold with the parents aren’t as strong. The reason for this was mainly because older residents are primarily spending time with the kids when their parents are working.

Overall, the older adults interviewed at Treehouse are quite happy with their arrangements (other than the high cost of living) but some are feeling the effects of over extending themselves and feel burned out in certain areas. This has never been truer then when they face the same issues coming up over and over again with no resolution. As one member pointed out, “It’s hard to stay positive when we keep going over the same things.” One such dilemma focuses on transitioning older families into smaller units. As one member said:

We have talked about and are trying to figure out if there should be a point when families should be expected to transition from a larger apartment to a smaller one once their children have moved away. This would make space for new families in the community; we haven't figured that out yet.

Another challenge members are trying to rectify is how to go about using many of their skills within the community. According to one resident there are areas of expertise that go unused because as a community member you are disqualified to use those talents, social workers or trauma experts may be a good example of some of these skills. As one member said, "I find it annoying that my skills are not used. I would love to teach the kids how to do some mindfulness or to teach them how to be still and just breathe." In addition many older adults have a wealth of knowledge about other cultures. Residents agree the center has a lovely ethnic diversity but it would also be nice if there was more enrichment in the kids' lives. This resident says "I would like them to be exposed to more cultures and countries and world events, there are a lot of life skills from our life experience that go unused and that is a shame."

Finally, frustrations around one's ability to physically participate in the things they want to do and the lack of participation from some community members lays heavy on the minds of those interviewed. However, most feel like the lack of participation dates back to the conception of Treehouse. One member suggested that "Treehouse should require a certain amount of time that older adults work with the families and their children every week." While on the other side of the block a resident quietly admits, "what frustrates me is my struggle to stay well. This results in me not having the strength to do the things I want to do." Members and staff alike are thoroughly committed to the mission of Treehouse. The growing pains they feel are typical for any foundation, perhaps what is unique is that people are open to hearing ideas and continue to

fight for the rights for everyone to have a safe and happy upbringing. As I move on to the next chapter, I will review and discuss some of these challenges in larger detail. I will look at some of the limitations and discuss parallels recognized throughout this interview process. Most importantly it is important to note how honored I feel for having the opportunity to share in the life experiences of these ten individuals through their stories. To me there is no greater honor than bearing witness to the unfolding of a person's life story.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The original intent of this study was to explore the experiences of elders who live at the Treehouse Community, an intentional intergenerational community in Easthampton, MA., and the ways in which they continue or expand the quality of meaning making in their everyday lives with the foster children and their families who they call neighbors. This area of research is severely lacking due to the limited amount of IIC's in our country and the fact that they are all relatively young. Hope Meadows, which is the oldest of the three communities, is a mere twenty-two years, opening its doors in 1994. This chapter summarizes the essential findings from my research and compares them to existing literature surrounding older adults, their relationships with themselves, their neighbors, the communities in which they live and in this particular case, staff members children, and families? In this chapter I will also investigate the clinical implications and limitations of the study, and propose suggestions for further research. My key findings will reflect the information found in the literature but most of what will be written comes from my experience as a gerontologist. Throughout this project it became apparent to me that one's lived experience, the relationships one keeps, one's levels of participation, and the on-going learning the residents and staff at Treehouse are experiencing as all generations age, are important factors to look at and discuss. I will investigate these conversations in the following order: 1) key findings, describing the relationship between the study results and previous literature; 2) implications for social work practice, discussing how social workers can incorporate the findings from this study and why this is important to the field of social work; and 3) recommendations for future research about aging in place in an IIC community.

## Key Findings

### **A Slice of Life Community: The life experience of older adults living at Treehouse.**

The literature is clear: when older adults become socially isolated it leads to negative outcomes (Fenster-Ehrlich, 2007; Golden, J., Conroy, R.M., Bruce, I., Denihan, A., Greene, E., Kirby, M. & Lawlor, B.A., 2009; Iecovich, Jacobs & Stessman, 2011; Weill & Rother, 1998-1999) with the most serious of these outcomes being an increase in mortality (Koenig, George, Larson, McCullough, Branch, & Kuchibhatla 1999; Patterson & Veenstra, 2010; Reblin & Uchino 2008; Uchino, 2006; Wilson & Moulton, 2010). The overwhelming amount of literature on this topic led me to compare what the research literature has to say against what I found in my own study. The literature defined *isolation* in terms of how one “remains in their home,” or a “lack of social networks” and “whether one is partnered in their home or living alone.” I challenged the literature by introducing terms from Gullette (1997), such as *age ideology* and *identity stripping*, which took a closer look at social isolation due to our culture’s messaging towards older adults and how those messages impact the aging process. When you compare the messages of the broader culture -- as we age we become less than -- with the experience from the older adults interviewed at Treehouse -- we feel like we are a part of a whole -- it seems obvious that this intergenerational approach provides a greater sense of overall wellness for the members interviewed.

When the literature focused more on the self than the culture at large it continued with the theme that with age one’s character often builds. This was quite different from what other literature stated, which was as we age our lives get smaller and more debilitated (Iecovich, Jacobs & Stessman, 2011). Bowyers (2014) declared a person with a strong sense of self favors a healthy dose of autonomy and this is nurtured by how someone feels they have been treated in

their world. This strong sense of self echoed throughout the stories that were told among the older adults interviewed at Treehouse. At Treehouse people are friendly, caring and helpful; there is also a feeling of being held. Such admiration and caring for the greater good of everyone demonstrates their sense of belonging to one another and the sovereignty of their own selves. Critchlow (2015) talked about a sense of indebtedness that one feels in communities similar to Treehouse. Indebtedness becomes a transaction of relationship rather than a financial exchange. For example, two of the older adults from Treehouse watched the kids from one family on Friday nights so their parents could take a respite from parenting. Today these parents walk one of the resident's dog on a daily basis for her. For the other resident the family was helpful in caring for her when she was ill and needing assistance. This kind of investment is much different from a financial exchange. If the families exchanged only money, there would be little social investment in their transaction. However, when we socially invest in the well-being of ourselves and others it creates a life of meaningful exchanges that benefit all parties. In this way indebtedness becomes a form of social investment. As Critchlow reminds us, "To be fully human...is to live in a community of relationships." (p.28).

**Relationship with self/others.** Lustbader (2011) writes, "Closeness deepens with the passage of years, long-standing relationships become an irreplaceable bounty in later life" (p. 35). Those sentiments are strongly echoed in the stories told by the oldest members of the Treehouse Community. What is clear from the research is that there is a real expanding of ones understanding of others. People have come to appreciate various kinds of skills that others possess that once they may have never had an interest in. For example, the academic who developed a deep gratitude for members who focused on cooking, preserving foods and housekeeping, what she once thought was done out of necessity she now understands is a

valuable skill. In this intergenerational community where people have either brought their interdependent life skills into the community or they have learned from others, there is a deeper connection that is felt. Community members talk of a capacity to care for others at a deeper level and through an expansion of the heart. People trust one another and they feel safe, they are family, and the feeling of belonging is represented at every stage of life. These experiences reflect the experiences of those who participated in a study by Goll et al., (2015) which looked at the relationship between social participation and social identity. Both the study and my research found that when people feel empowered they are more likely to be engaged with their surroundings. Residents at Treehouse overwhelmingly talked about the ample opportunities that are available to them and because they live, work and volunteer in an interdependent community, they feel supported to do more and give more.

One of the challenges that the Goll et al., (2015) study talked about was the barriers older adults face around financial issues. This same concern came up with all members interviewed from Treehouse. Both the research and my findings showed that one of the biggest barriers older adults face are financial challenges due to the rising costs of living and a dwindling bank account. Schaub (2015) talks about how intergenerational communities are continually trying to find more deliberate ways to move away from financial resources and rely more on social resources. Saying ultimately, the goal is to move away from “defining security in terms of bank balances, and more towards a wealth of relationship.” Adding, “We’re trying to address a major societal need without relying on a governmental safety net. (Schaub, 2015, p.17)” As Treehouse continues to age, addressing members’ financial concerns is becoming a more vital need and one that may require an overhaul of the current system.



**Politics of participation.** One of the more interesting discoveries I found in my research has to do with the politics of participation. Both the literature and half of the members interviewed tell us that a commitment to participate in one's community is a valuable asset for the self and the community that one resides in. But what does participation really mean? How do we measure it and who decides what enough participation is? If we are to presume that it is important for all members of a community to participate in a way that is visible, then what happens or what does it mean when one's form of participation cannot be seen? Is there truly anyone who is not participating or is it that what some individuals are doing isn't necessarily visible to others or it doesn't conform to the common definition of participation and activity. Is that a problem? After reflecting on the symposium, Sasser (2016) questioned, "If being inactive in this community is a problem then how do we create a community where all are accepted, where diversity is seen in the truest sense of the word?" Which leads me to question, if the community is able to embrace activity from non-visible ways is it still non-participation or does the very idea that non-participation has an accepted role in community give it purpose, or perhaps a role?

After the symposium, the group shared a story of one resident as defining participation became an interesting task - one that needs further consideration. The resident, who no longer resides at Treehouse, was once an "active" member of the community. At some point health issues began to play a major role in her life and she became more fragile. Members reflected on how she was able to participate "by connecting with people on an emotional level." She was no longer able to take long walks and kayak but she was able to sit and talk to people about their lives, showing interest around how they were getting along with others, how their families were doing, and inquiring about their overall well-being. Similarly, in a story about an 84-year-old

frail woman who helps a young boy with his studies, Lustbader (2011) writes, “Generosity calls us to life...their time together was a taste of peace, a chance to focus their minds on their skill with words rather than pain” (p. 66). In both of these examples we are able to witness the power in the subtle often missed ways people give.

Another interesting outcome of my research was the strong feelings interviewees had due to the amount of time they were able to spend with the children. Some harbored feelings of guilt due to the limited amount of time they often have, even though these conflicts were due to work, health and wellness, or other interests outside of Treehouse. This interesting discovery was not found in the literature I reviewed, however it is an important discovery that needs to be addressed. Lustbader (2011) writes:

Many of us find it increasingly necessary to play a contributory role in other’s lives and to see them do well. This is the embodiment of what the psychologist Erik Erikson called *generativity*, the culminating stage of our development. Putting our hard-won competence to use vindicates the effort that went into acquiring what we know. (p. 69-70)

Sharing our knowledge and know-how from years of experience is a satisfying endeavor that builds one’s self-worth and a true sense of accomplishment. It is also the building of one’s legacy. It makes sense to me that those who are unable to spend much of their time with younger generations who are in need of assistance will have feelings of disappointment or guilt due to a level of involvement that has diminished through circumstance. But I also believe that since this community views their members as family there is a heightened amount of responsibility to their neighbors one feels thereby pushing themselves further than they might if they weren’t as invested in those they wish to serve. Inevitably setting boundaries became an important topic and

what was discovered and is vitally important for all members of the community (whether it is because you are compelled to feel guilty for not doing enough or you feel like others should do more) is that when you practice good self-care and set good boundaries with others, young and old, you are modeling healthy behaviors for all. And when you feel better, you do better, and you participate in all the ways you feel compelled to in healthier ways.

**Moving forward: We are all aging.** Another interesting finding that was not talked about explicitly in the literature are the challenges communities such as Treehouse face as all of its members grow older. After 10 years many of the young children who first arrived have now grown up and moved on to college or in one case the kids are still living in the community while their mother moved away after remarrying. For the most part parents are still living in the same townhomes they did when the kids were younger and by all means this is their right. By staying in their original home it allows the older children a place of comfort and familiarity when returning home from college breaks and holiday vacations. Adult children living at home is also more popular today than in earlier years. In a new report, Fry (2016) says, “living with a parent is the most common young adult living arrangement for the first time on record. In 2014 the number of 18 to 34 year olds living at home was 32.1% compared to lower numbers throughout history” (p.1). Homestead (2016), a staff member of the Treehouse foundation, elaborated on this trend by echoing that young adults are living at home longer and often return home after college saying, “this is not a Treehouse trend but one that is happening across the country and what is more important to remember is that one of the fundamental strengths of this community is to support youth at all stages of their lives.” Therefore, when the young adults of Treehouse are ready to move on they will feel supported before and after they go, whether it be as a community

member or an Alumni. Homestead (2016) adds, “It will be exciting to see how these kids carry the Treehouse legacy out into the world.”

With respect to some of the older members of this community, their needs are described as: assist with cooking, cleaning, medication management, and other household duties. In particular, the concerns around financial responsibilities are troublesome and many would benefit from sharing the burden of cost by cohousing. Residents explained to me that they are continually trying to come up with solutions around these issues. One interviewee suggested that adult children and older adults live together. Another idea is for older adults to cohabitate together in the cottages. However, currently neither the original design of the units and the existing rules set forth by the property management company allow for these options to become a reality.

These scenarios create complicated dilemmas for the entire community. On one hand, for families who have raised their children and continue to reside at Treehouse, this is their home and it is important for these older kids to have stability and consistency in their home life. On the other hand, it limits the number of new families that are able to move into Treehouse due to a limited amount of available units. At Treehouse there are twelve townhomes for families which have up to five bedrooms and 48 one-bedroom cottages for people who are 55 and older. It seems reasonable for management, families and older adults at Treehouse to expand their thinking about how they can best serve existing members of the community while making space for new families and younger foster children to move in. Interviewees talked about the frustration they often feel when addressing these same issues and how they come up over and over again with little to no resolution. Homestead (2016) tells me the challenges the Treehouse Community faces are never the same. Treehouse is a growing and breathing entity and because of this the challenges they face are forever changing. For these very reasons it seems like the

only way to create change is to continue the conversation and look for new and inventive ways to allow for transformation.

In Smith's (2001) account, one foster parent from Hope Meadows described the ten things they see as being critical for the children to have: "Understanding, trust, love, compassion, time, security, praise, discipline, self-esteem and pride" (p.199-200). When these traits are practiced and modeled in the community they are passed on to the younger generations. This seems important when talking about changes that could potentially mean altering the make-up of the home life these kids have known for much of their life in a safe setting. If what Smith said is true, then these kids have been raised with the loving traits that a lifestyle filled with social investment and an interdependent life practice which honors inclusion of all community members and is seen as an intricate piece of their upbringing. By accessing the innovative minds of the children who have been raised in this environment it seems reasonable that they could have a great influence on creating new solutions for the community.

### **Implications for SW Practice**

The findings of this study show the need for more gerontological social workers throughout North American communities. In this day and age the growing number of older adults who are in need of viable housing options for advanced aging is becoming increasingly complicated and expensive. The demand for affordable housing is at an all-time high and older adults need a multitude of options, like intentional intergenerational communities as places to live. Because of these high demands it is of great importance for social workers to have access to gerontological training. With such training students are able to expand their thinking around issues of aging. Instead of approaching aging with the trajectory of debility and decline, the gerontological approach offers alternative views on the theory of aging and the constructs that

are placed upon older adults. By looking critically at how people age in their social environments, Gerontological social workers offer a wider lens that deconstructs the culture's view on age and aging and creates new narratives with their clients around how one's own aging identity influences their sense of self.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In this section I will review the limitations and biases of my study. In addition, I will discuss areas of further interest and on-going investigation that I feel need to be explored. This section is divided as follows: 1) limitations and biases, and 2) future studies.

**Limitations, strengths and biases.** It is important to point out the limitations of this study that I found most cumbersome to navigate. The most significant being: time, finances and personnel. Because of the limited amount of time that is given to do the research and gather sources I was limited in what I was able to accomplish. As a student I lacked the resources financially that I needed to take my research out into other IICs around the country. In both these examples, time and money or a lack thereof and having fewer resources played an important role in the depth and breadth I was able to explore with this project. If both time and money were a luxury I would have traveled to both Hope Meadows and Bridge Meadows offering symposium events and one-on-one interviews with questions identical to the ones I asked at Treehouse.

Another limitation for this study was the limited number of participants: N=10. There are fifty-three elders living at Treehouse which means I was only able to capture the experiences of a little less than 19%. Despite the small size of this convenience sample, this study has many strengths. The opportunity to conduct qualitative interviews in a private setting, as well as in the context of the symposium that was conducted at the Treehouse community center, offered older residents the opportunity to share with me and their peers their life stories in ongoing and

meaningful ways. The stories from these residents offered an in depth look at the characteristics of the residents who prefer a lifestyle of interdependence and collaboration within an intergenerational community.

As a researcher, I was disappointed by the lack of people who identify as male being a part of the study, as well as by having an all-white sample. I strived to include all types of older adults in my sample, however most older residents at Treehouse identify as female, which is important to think of in terms of who this IIC model attracts. There are also very few older adult residents who are of color, which, according to those interviewed, mirrors the community at large, for there are a relatively low number of Black, Latino, Asian and other minority groups residing in Western Massachusetts. It is unfortunate that I was not able to connect with the few non-white residents at Treehouse. For future research, talking with residents of color and residents who have been viewed as less involved with the community will provide valuable information to add to the conversation.

Finally, as one who has worked with the aging community for many years and is trained in critical gerontology, I automatically bring a bias to my work. I continually strive to review the data collected throughout my research from a gerontological perspective and based on theory, taking the words from an older adults' lived experience over the words from a young researcher who studies older adults. Calasanti (2003) reminds us from the perspective of middle aged persons, "Aging is most preferred by not aging at all, or at least to minimize the extent to which it is apparent that one is aging both internally and externally" (p.200-201). However, we have learned from listening to those who have a long life of experience that there are many joys in aging: learning to love deeper, think more critically about the self and others and taking time to reflect on a life well lived. I believe the ability to deliver the kind of dialogues where our elders

are able to reflect deeply and share these profound experiences comes directly from the manner in which the listener is able to hear them. For me this is of great honor because I feel as if I have captured not only their stories but also their spirits.

**Future studies.** My hope is the results of this study may be used to shape future programming at Treehouse and other IICs, offering a comprehensive summary describing how the elders of this intergenerational community live among all members of this community and outside of the community as well. As mentioned previously if I had the time and money to continue my research I would do a comparison study of all three IIC communities. My recommendations include: creating a strong ritual for seasoned citizens of Treehouse to welcome new members of the community; gather a larger, more diverse sample of older adults from inside the community and create dialogue with residents of all ages on ways to alter the requirements around housing laws (for instance adult children living with an elder, etc.). By doing so what is being created is an alternative living model for all members of the community which specifically includes looking at how older adults can age in place at Treehouse. In addition, Treehouse may want to consider hosting a caregiver support group and trainings. With such training younger adults can learn life giving skills and potentially a fee for assisting in the care of the community's oldest members which in turn may allow them to stay until the end of their life if that is what they wish.

### **Final Conclusion (Self-Reflections)**

As this project draws to a close I am drawn back to this moment in my research when I sat in a room full of vibrant older adults who offered me countless stories around community activism, resilience, divorce, death, job shifts, raising children and fostering them alongside their community. The people interviewed in this project have dedicated their lives to living full-



fledged lives by struggling, serving, persevering and enduring through a life-time of change. They are out-of-the-box thinkers who are not afraid to challenge the system and better yet challenge their own minds. The benefit I have received from working side-by-side with these folks is richer than any textbook has ever offered me. I am humbled by this experience and it brings me great joy to think that the children at Treehouse are exposed to this mastery everyday of their lives. I am also reminded of a patient of mine I served some years back. During a scheduled office visit she confided in me that she was living alone and was only able to get to the bathroom and kitchen by couch surfing (this is when you travel around the room by holding on to pieces of furniture as you go). Together she and I talked about alternative living situations, she had two grown children in the area but she did not want to burden them, they were busy with their own lives. She reassured me that her daughter visits at least once a week bringing her groceries. I gently tried to convince her that her current living situation was not safe and I would like to help her find a safer situation. This led to a conversation about moving to an assisted living or nursing home. She was resistant to the idea and I asked why. To begin with there was the lack of money; there are few people who have thousands of dollars to spend on institutionalized care month-to-month. But more importantly to her she believed that moving into a facility would mean the end of seeing her family. The words she said to me carved out a piece of my heart and is what ultimately started me on this crusade to embrace IIC communities and other ways in which members of a community can support one another. This woman said to me:

Do you like to visit nursing homes? Do you like the smell, the atmosphere, the row of wheelchairs placed in front of the television in the 'activity room?'. Of course you don't, and neither do I or my family. If you send me to one of those places my family will no longer come to see me. At least here I know I'll see

my daughter at least once a week. Thanks but no thanks, I'll take my chances.

(Personal communication, 2008)

We sat together in silence; there were no words, only an unsettling in my head and heart. I silently vowed to find a better way for people to live out the remaining days of their lives. A commitment I remember every day.

As my work here draws to a close I am clear that the greatest wealth available to us as humans is by way of relationships. It is my hope that by sharing the stories of these ten individuals it will inspire residents of The Treehouse community, future residents of other IIC communities, professionals in the field, and the community at large, to continue to seek out innovative ways to meet the needs of all members living in an intergenerational community setting, from the moment they arrive until the moment they depart.

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## APPENDIX A

### TREEHOUSE FLIER

# *An Elder Lead Symposium –*

A Symposium “dealing with ideal love and the vision of absolute beauty.” –PLATO

## What a Meaningful Life!

Join us for a conversation on how you, the elders at The Treehouse Community, continue or expand the quality of meaning making in your everyday lives.

Our goal will be to gather narrative responses based on the questions designed by an elderly peer focus group

## February 11, 2016

10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

THE TREEHOUSE COMMUNITY CENTER  
1 TREEHOUSE CIRCLE, EASTHAMPTON, MA. 01027



**Dr. Jennifer Sasser** is the former chair of the Human Studies Dept. at Marylhurst University in Portland, Or.,

Co-Author & consulting editor with Harry R. Moody for the text; *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*. She is also the creator of The Gero Punk Project, ([www.geropunkproject.org](http://www.geropunkproject.org)), a vibrant project discussing topics like: cross-generational activism; legacy; intergenerational relationships; embracing aging; loss and transition; and contemplative gerontology. In Feb. of 2012 she was awarded Distinguished Teacher of the year by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education.

## Schedule

**10:00 AM** – Salutations and Greetings

**10:15 AM** – Focus Group: History and Outcomes

**10:30 AM** – Break

**10:45 AM** – Open discussion with the group

**11:50 AM** – Final thoughts and gratitude

**12:00 PM** – Closing



**Libby Hinze** is a master's student at Smith College for Social Work in Northampton, MA. Born and raised in Portland,

Or. She has her BA in Human Studies from Marylhurst University and is a certified gerontologist. Her compassion and spirit brings a fresh perspective to intentional aging. She has worked for many years in the medical field as a case manager & a care coordinator. Currently she is doing her second year internship at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, MA in the Inpatient Palliative Care and Geriatric Departments. The research gathered at this event will be used specifically for her master's thesis project.

The purpose of this event is to gather data about life's meaning for master thesis project by Ms. Hinze. All members will be videotaped and recorded for transcription purposes.

### Questions?

Please call Libby Hinze @ [REDACTED]  
This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

## APPENDIX B

### E-MAIL TO FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS

#### *Focus Group for ELDER SYMPOSIUM*

Good Afternoon Ladies my name is Libby Hinze and I received your names from Kerry Homstead at Treehouse. I am writing you today because it is my understanding that you are interested in playing a vital role in the upcoming symposium which will be held on February 11th from 10:00 am to noon (please see flier attached for more details).

The purpose of the Symposium is to have an open dialogue with the elders of the Treehouse Community about how you make meaning in your everyday lives. That said the questions that Dr. Sasser and I hope to present to the group will all come from a focus group of elders who live at or are involved with The Treehouse Foundation and those elders would be you!

This research project comes from a participatory action research lens. This means the theme and the questions that we will talk about will come directly from your ideas, and not from a younger researcher who may assume they know what it is like to be an elder, or a resident of the Treehouse Community. This is why I need to hear from you and hear about what really matters to you.

I would like to meet with you (there are four of you in all) on either a Thursday, Saturday or Sunday. I think an hour should be plenty of time to come up with your questions and themes but if you would all like more time I can make myself flexible. Please see the times listed below and let me know what works for you. If you have any questions don't hesitate to call. Thank you so very much, I am very excited about this project. Libby Hinze, MSW candidate 2016, [REDACTED]

#### FOCUS GROUP PROPOSED MEETING TIMES:

Thursday Jan. 21st @ 10:00 AM or 4:00 PM

Thursday Jan. 28th @ 10:00 AM, 2:00 PM or 4:00 PM

Saturday Jan. 23rd @ 10:00 AM or 4:00 PM

Sunday Jan. 24th @ 10:00 AM, 2:00 PM or 7:00 PM

If none of these times work for you please let me know what will work better and I will try and accommodate those needs.

Thank you once again for your help and expertise. Warmly, Libby

APPENDIX C  
CONSENT FORMS

Dear Potential Research Participant, My name is Elizabeth (Libby) Hinze. I am a graduate student at Smith College for Social Work and I am conducting a research project to learn more about how elders living in The Treehouse Community together with foster children and their families continue or expand the quality of meaning making in their everyday lives. This study will be presented as a thesis and may be used in possible future research or publications on the topic.

You are being asked to participate in this study if you are an elder currently living at The Treehouse Community in a single dwelling cottage or of you are an active volunteer at the Treehouse Foundation. Participation in this research requires that you attend the symposium offered in Mid-February and that you engage in conversation with your neighbors around making meaning in your everyday life as a resident at The Treehouse Community.

Although there will be no financial benefit for taking part in the study, your participation will allow you to share your valuable knowledge and experience about the benefit of living in an intentional intergenerational community and how that experience has impacted your life. The information gained from this study will not only help The Treehouse Foundation in supporting the elders who reside here but it will also help in paving the way for other communities like this one.

Your confidentiality will be protected in a number of ways as consistent with Federal regulations. When you arrive at the Symposium you will be given a name tag and asked to use a first name only, pseudo or real, and attach it to your shirt or blouse. The name tag will serve as the only identifier to you as an individual. Your full name or any other pertinent information will

not be collected. The event will be audio taped and the audios of the event will be stored in a locked and secure environment for three years following the completion of the research, consistent with Federal regulations. After that time, all materials will be destroyed. The only other person who will have any access to the audios will be Dr. Sasser, the expert gerontologist, who is mandated to sign a confidentiality form.

As a voluntary participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study before or during the event. If you have any questions about your rights or any aspects of this study, do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED] or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Rights Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

BY CIRCLING YES BELOW, INITIALING IT AND WRITING THE DATE, YOU INDICATE THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS; AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Please note: If you choose to mail me the survey using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope, PLEASE INCLUDE this consent form and keep the second copy for your records.

I agree to participate: YES            NO

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for participating in this study.

Libby Hinze, 2016 MSW candidate Smith School for Social Work

## APPENDIX D

### SYMPOSIUM TOPIC E-MAIL TO FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS

Good Morning everyone and what a beautiful morning it is in lovely Western MA.

I would like to once again thank you all for your participation in the focus group. I have enclosed the schedule for the day.

As you will see the questions that Dr. Sasser and I pulled out of the focus group conversation are the questions I have highlighted in aqua. During the symposium we will ask the participants to keep these questions in mind as we dig a little deeper into their meaning.

The groups that we will break into will draw their conversation from positive experiences around working with others. We start by looking at what works and how do we feel when it works. As these experiences arise from the smaller groups each group will present one story to share with the larger group. Dr. Sasser will then work with the larger group on themes that have emerged. This will take place three different times. Each time taking a closer look at the felt experience and moving closer in to these experiences.

What I ask of all of you is to review the questions highlighted and provide any feedback you may have about what we have come up with. Do you like? Is there anything you would like to add or take away? We are open to all feedback and we are very excited about Thursday's event. I hope to see you all there and Please, Please, Please encourage your neighbors to come play with us!!

Warmly, Libby Hinze  
MSW candidate 2016, Smith School for Social Work

APPENDIX E

HUMAN SUBJECT REVIEW APPROVAL LETTER



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 2, 2016

Elizabeth Hinze

Dear Libby,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor

APPENDIX F

CONFIDENTIALITY FORM DR. SASSER

**Assurance of Research Confidentiality Form: Dr. Sasser**

This research project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- Non SSW person(s) who will have access to this data for data analysis or research assistance/data collection purposes shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- This data analyst/data collection/research assistant should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, - *Elizabeth (Libby) Hinze*- shall be responsible for ensuring that the data analyst/data collection/research assistant who works with the project is instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that s/he has signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

**PLEDGE**

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, *Elizabeth (Libby) Hinze* for this project. I understand that, according to Federal Regulations, violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of data analysis services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature, *Dr. Jennifer Sasser*

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature, *Elizabeth (Libby) Hinze*

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

APPENDIX G

EVALUATION FORM

What a Meaningful Life Symposium Feedback Form

What were the major take-aways for you from today's discussion?

What was helpful for you today? Did you learn something new about a neighbor or a friend?

What did we miss? Is there something else you'd like to discuss?

Moving forward do you have any ideas about other programs or events you would like to see the Treehouse Community offer? Do you have any special interests or areas of expertise that you would like to share with the community?

Is there anything else you'd like us to know?

Would you like to tell us more about yourself?

Thank you for participating in today's event. We very much appreciate your feedback. Libby and Jenny