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Living Here - Boomers

Sacramento companion programs keep seniors from isolation, decline

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[Lou Bordisso](#) is one of the lucky ones.

At 97, a widower for the past seven years, Bordisso still is tied to the community by a warm handful of friends and also by [Del Stacy](#), a volunteer from the [Department of Human Assistance's](#) Senior Companion program.

Every [Tuesday morning](#), Stacy takes Bordisso to run his errands. They leave the small Land Park house where Bordisso has lived since the late 1940s, and they make the rounds: the bank, the supermarket and then maybe the barbershop, topped off by Bordisso's favorite treat, lunch at [Burger King](#).

"Del and I get along pretty good," said Bordisso, a retired tavern keeper whose relatives run [Old Ironsides](#). "We haven't had cross words yet."

They talk about baseball, and they talk about Bordisso's only child, a priest who lives in [Vallejo](#).

"Me and Lou get along great," said Stacy, 64, a Vietnam veteran and retired maintenance worker. "He's my favorite client."

They're friends. And that counts.

Isolation can be deadly for the elderly, leading to a downward spiral that can devastate their emotional and physical well-being.



Yet too often, isolation is a consequence of lives that are as long as [Lou Bordisso's](#) – the result of people outliving their spouses and siblings, their longtime friends, their neighbors and all their other close ties. Their community changes around them, and the natural turnover of nearby businesses and residences leaves them without even the familiar faces they've seen for years.

Then factor in the loss of mobility. As they age and deal with arthritis and other medical issues, many people have difficulty getting around on their own. And many deal with transportation limitations, as well, after they give up driving.

Many more cope with the loss of hearing and vision.

And their daily world quickly grows smaller and smaller – and increasingly lonely.

"Essentially, they have the television and the four walls," said [Marianne Gammon](#), a coordinator with [Sutter SeniorCare](#), one of the local programs that seeks to connect older people, especially the frail and homebound, with the outside world while allowing them to live in their own homes.

The problem of isolation is already enormous. A 2009 Area 4 Agency on Aging survey of people 60 and older in [Sacramento County](#) showed that fully 64 percent dealt with loneliness and depression every month.

Similarly, a new AARP study found that 44 million Americans who are 45 and older suffer from chronic loneliness.

And experts say that the loneliness imposed by a life isolated from others can negatively affect a host of medical conditions, from diabetes to high [blood pressure](#), even sleep disorders.

"Depression comes first, and then a decline of function," said Gammon. "Depression is a natural consequence of isolation. We're not meant to be alone."

Until a year ago, Ruby Smith was one of the unconnected. The retired cook lived in a Carmichael apartment with a daughter who worked much of the time. Smith knew no one else there, she said, so she sat alone watching TV to fill the empty hours.

"When you sit all day every day, you just don't feel good," said Smith, 75. "After a while, I didn't care whether I just sat."

Now she lives in her own apartment at a Natomas independent living facility, and she spends her weekdays at Sutter SeniorCare's adult day health center in downtown Sacramento. More than that, she now has Brian Yip, a 24-year-old volunteer who spends time with her at the center and has visited her at home.

"She's mean to me," said Yip, teasing.

"I like him, and he knows it," said Smith.

For many of the 1,500 homebound clients of the Asian Community Center's Meals on Wheels program, the volunteers who deliver their meals are their only daily contact with the outside world, a reliable lifeline that they trust.

The added bonus, said program manager Rithy Thong, is that most of the Meals on Wheels volunteers are retirees, too.

"When they're motivated to give back, it's a positive outcome for them, as well," he said. "We're trying to build a community of senior recipients and senior volunteers."

So is the county's Senior Companion program, which was established a quarter-century ago and currently has 300 elderly clients plus 34 volunteers in their 60s, 70s and 80s, said program director Rosalinda Stoffel.

Preventing isolation, it seems, is a two-way street.

"There's a lot of satisfaction in doing this," said Stacy. "The good part is when you see the clients' health problems get better. Some have been very isolated, so there's a big difference afterward with them."

Someone made Lou Bordisso a holiday cake, which they picked up on their round of errands last week.

"I'm getting pretty old," said Bordisso. "You think I can make 100?"

"You'll make it," said Stacy. "And I'll be right here."