

Silver Lining



A scrappy senior sisterhood refuses to let a little gray get in the way

"Small but mighty." Surely, you've heard the phrase to describe a scrappy athlete or a precocious child with the ability to express themselves with passion and conviction. What about a non-profit service organization? Could one of those fit into the "small but mighty" category?

Staff and participants at **SOWN** would shout, "YES!" Since 1986, when women's support agencies such as **WIT**, **WOAR**, **Women's Way**, and **Women Against Abuse** were doing important work to serve a new generation of women, SOWN began and continues to provide community-based services for generations of older women in Philadelphia.

SOWN's founder and retired Executive Director, Merle Drake, formed the organization to address the erasure of women in our culture as they age and the effect it that can have on their self-worth. Not only did she notice that the messaging in ads for women's beauty products were typically marketed to combat the horrors of an aging face, but she learned through her own personal experiences.

Her MSW training added to her understanding that many older women felt alone in their struggle to manage life on a fixed income, cope with the loss of family and friends, and deal with a complete role change – from that of a valued life partner, bread winner, or community member – to someone completely on their own.

Merle started with a short series of workshops at a senior center to bring older women together to share their experiences and challenges with each other. From that short series – and with a small team of staff and the support of volunteers – SOWN grew into a network of empowering social connections and crucial resources for older women throughout Philadelphia. SOWN, that originally stood for the Supportive Older Women's Network, welcomes all older adults into our programs which address core issues of aging.

To address those issues, SOWN continues to use groups in conjunction with individual counseling, educational workshops, and resource referrals. Group members share knowledge, resources, and resiliency to assist other older adults who are coping with similar concerns.

The social connections can help reduce or stabilize depression, increase coping skills, and promote independence. SOWN's Homebound Teletherapy Groups allows homebound older adults (or those dealing with health issues or disabilities) in the Greater Philadelphia area to benefit from healthy peer relationships. Participants connect by phone to their weekly peer support groups, which are facilitated by licensed clinical social workers. They may also access safety net services, including individual counseling, and information and referral, as needed.

We can't always predict when our role in our family and community will change. Over 15,000 grandparents in the city find themselves raising grandchildren and becoming primary caregivers for the second time. The caregiving demands on grandparents can be physically, emotionally, and financially overwhelming. In response, we created the [GrandFamily Resource Center](#) (GFRC). The GFRC offers three programs to help grandparents adapt and thrive in this family transition together:

1. Philly Families Connect, which provides weekly group counseling, phone support, and more for grandparents raising their grandchildren;
2. Philly Families Read Together, our family literacy course designed to help grandparents support their grandchildren in their early learning and;
3. Philly Families Eat Smart, a healthy living initiative for grandparents raising their grandchildren.

Combating COVID

The pandemic has shown us the importance of staying connected. This has been especially true for older adults among whom the virus poses a greater risk than other age groups and adds to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety. In the spring of 2020, when the stay-at-home guidelines were issued, SOWN transitioned all of our in-person programming to the telephone so our participants could safely stay together.

COVID also brought a persistent, and often confusing, tidal wave of information about the virus. To alleviate the stress and confusion of sifting through multiple news sources, SOWN distributed a bi-weekly newsletter, SOWN Together, geared towards older adults from Summer 2020 through Winter 2021. SOWN Together offered up-to-date information on virus transmission, safety precautions, testing, vaccine development, and community resources, such as utility and food assistance.

Our newsletter caught the attention of WHYY's [N.I.C.E.](#) initiative (News & Information Community Exchange) and prompted them to invite us to join their collaborative of grassroots community news and content creators. N.I.C.E. introduced us to the NW Local, which then asked us to submit articles that give voice to older adults and the topics that are important as we grow older. We are excited to talk about events and services for older adults. We

are even more excited to highlight the lives and experiences of older adults right here in the Philadelphia area. We are grateful for the opportunity to share this space.

See you all next month!

SOWN

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