

Packing a houseful of family memories

I'm not sure when I first read Robert Hellenga's 1994 novel, "The Sixteen Pleasures," but it has stayed with me for many years. Not because it's great literature; it isn't. And not because it's a well-researched, informative story about art and love set in Florence, Italy, after the 1966 flooding of the Arno River, although it is. What keeps this book lodged in my mind is its central themes of change and continuity and the extraordinary gift of being able to "let go" — of assumptions, of relationships and, especially, of things.

Hellenga's American protagonist, a professional book conservator who joins the international response to rescue priceless artifacts and works of art from the ravages of the floodwaters, learns valuable lessons about letting go while she's in Florence. Literally and figuratively, she releases treasure after treasure into "the river of beautiful things," knowing they will be transformed by the passage of time but never lose their truest, most inherent value.

I've been thinking a lot about the river of beautiful things this week. First, my BDN colleague Julia Bayly wrote an article about how to sort through a lifetime of belongings in the effort to downsize as we age. She points out that there are people — bless them — who make it their business, literally, to help us in this process, bringing a clear objectivity to an otherwise emotionally fraught time.

Then, Facebook sent me a "memory" photo from three Aprils ago. It's a shot of me standing in front of a bright yellow forsythia bush near my parents' house in Virginia. It was full-blown spring there — mockingbirds, redbud and that soft, sweet, southern air — and still sleety and gray here in Maine. "Almost like a vacation," I wrote.

But it wasn't a vacation. My brother and I had gone down together for a week, meeting up with our stepsister for the milestone task of emptying the house our parents had occupied since the early 1970s. We all dreaded the prospect, for a variety of reasons, but it needed to be done. My mother died 20 years earlier. My stepfather stayed on there alone, until he reached 100, when he finally agreed to move in with his oldest daughter. The house was our problem.

It was bulging with furniture, books, art, photographs, dishes, kitchenware, paperwork, tools, knickknacks. They filled the attic, basement and garage. Some of it

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MEG HASKELL



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Visitors and volunteers play a game of bingo at My Friend's Place, a daytime activity program for people with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, in Bangor recently.

Amongst friends

How an activities program is helping Mainers age in place

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

The mood in the cozy gathering room at My Friend's Place was cheerful on a recent rainy afternoon, as clients and volunteers enjoyed an after-lunch game of bingo, modified to reflect the springlike theme of the day, tulips.

"T-12, U-26, L-33, I-60, P-75 ... TULIP!" Mary Lawler, 91, of Bangor laughed as she read off the covered squares on her card. Her friends applauded as she selected a small, colorful stuffed animal as a prize, and the game went on.

My Friend's Place, a nonprofit daytime activities program for people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of memory loss, marks its 15th anniversary this year.

The program, housed at the First United Methodist Church in Bangor, grew out of the congregation's commitment to supporting families caring for aging relatives at home, according to director Sylvia "Skippy" Valentine of Orono. Now, although it shares administrative support with the church, My Friend's Place pays a small stipend for the space and has no programmatic ties with the religious mission there.

"People want to stay in their homes as long as possible, but



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Sylvia "Skippy" Valentine, the director of My Friend's Place, recently talks about the daytime activities program for people with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia in Bangor.

caretaking families need a break to run errands and a chance to get away from each other," Valentine said. My Friend's Place provides that opportunity. "It's not only respite for caregivers, but much-needed stimulation for people experiencing memory loss," she said.

My Friend's Place meets twice per week for four hours. The program is licensed to serve up to 12 clients; generally eight or 10 attend on any given day, along with a handful of volunteers. For \$8 per hour, the state-licensed program provides a measured mix of upbeat social interaction, physical exercise indoors and out, craft projects, games, guided conversations and supervision, all aimed at maintaining physical strength, mental acuity and social skills as long as possible.

For low-income clients, some "scholarship" funding is available through the Eastern Area Agency on Aging, private donations and

other sources. The program, which operates on an annual budget of about \$40,000, also relies on an annual fundraiser and an allocation from the United Way of Eastern Maine.

"These people lose so many pieces of their independence," Valentine said. "Our goal is to slow the process of their disease and help them tap into the skills they still have."

A separate group, Memory Joggers, meets weekly with clients who are in the earliest stages of memory loss and provides them with mental puzzles and problems to solve, tactile learning exercises, homework and other activities aimed at strengthening their memory and cognitive function.

With three part-time paid staffers and a cadre of dedicated volunteers — many of retirement age or older themselves — Memory Joggers and My Friend's Place have served hundreds of Bangor-

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Seniors, growers connect through Maine Senior FarmShare

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

Spring is barely a gleam in the weatherman's eye these days. But for some older Mainers, the rollout of the 2016 Maine Senior FarmShare program last week stirred deep anticipation of the sweet aroma of fresh-tilled soil and the welcome sight of tender young vegetables at local farm stands.

The federally funded Senior FarmShare program, established in 2001, connects low-income seniors with participating nearby farmers providing them with funds for farm produce. A modest \$50 voucher encourages them to obtain healthy, fresh produce from a local grower, who can in turn rely on a loyal, local customer likely to return throughout the season, long after the voucher is spent. Last year in Maine, the program served more than 17,000 seniors at 105 participating farms.

To qualify for Senior FarmShare, seniors must earn no more than \$21,775 per year for a one-person household or \$29,471 per year for a two-person household. Native Americans can qualify at age 55; for everyone else, the age threshold is 60.

On Tuesday morning in Sangerville, Stutzman's Farm Stand & Bakery opened its doors to a bedraggled crowd of older friends and neighbors waiting patiently in the rain to sign up for Senior FarmShare. The farm had



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Rainie Stutzman (left) and Wendy Frye carry lettuce to the greenhouse to be planted in Sangerville. Stutzman and her husband, who own Stutzman's Farm Stand & Bakery, participate in the Maine Senior FarmShare Program, which connects low-income seniors with participating farmers.

posted an early sign-up event on its Facebook page, hoping to enroll a large group of participants efficiently, before the start of the busy planting season ahead. It worked.

"There must have been 60 of them standing out there," said Rainie Stutzman, who runs the family farm with her husband, Sid.

She brought them inside, served up warming cups of coffee and tea and helped them fill out vouchers entitling them to fresh produce from the Stutzman farm, a three-generation landmark in southern Piscataquis County. By noon, more than 140 seniors had signed up, including many who have participated in the program for years.

Stutzman anticipated another big turnout on Wednesday — a sunny day was forecast — and then a steady ramp-up of participants as summer approaches. The farm is authorized to serve about 450 program participants this year and will have a waiting list. Similar scenarios are playing out at farms all across the state.

Funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for this year's program in Maine will provide for 15,664 vouchers at 95 participating farms — at least one in each county. It's a small decrease from last year, but program manager Julie Waller of the Maine agriculture department said states typically receive an infusion

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I need more than duct tape to patch my life

The fenced area that safely contains my four Brittany dogs minimizes the threat of the busy state road in front of my house and allows them a large area to run and play and explore. But it also gives them something else: a place to dig holes.

The holes would not be a big deal, but I have to mow the area in summer, my neighbor and I travel between our two houses through the fenced area, and the dogs run and play there. I constantly am worrying about broken limbs and torn ligaments because of those stupid holes.

The dogs also have dug several holes in an embankment of dirt that directs water away from the house's foundation. I really need to do something about those or I am going to have a worse water problem in the cellar of my old farmhouse.

I've tried filling in the holes with dirt and rocks and packing it in. I've caught the dogs in the act, towered menacingly over them and emphatically yelled "NO!!!!" I've watched them wait for me to leave, peeked back at them and witnessed new digging with increased fervor. I've tried distracting them with treats and other activities, but the draw of the dig is just too great.

I'm at a loss for a good solution but am debating the merits of concrete.

This is one of the many times when I really miss my husband Jim, who died of pancreatic cancer in December 2010. He loved puzzles like this. His thrifty Yankee ingenuity and his appreciation and knowledge of the mechanics of how things work would cleverly solve some of the most persistent problems in ways that never would have occurred to me.

Bits of duct tape, electrical tape, wire and twine, spare parts from objects unrelated to the problem, an understanding of electricity and mechanics at an intermediate level, an eye for level and aesthetics, and an ability to build just about anything with wood gave Jim an impressive war chest for problem-solving.

For example, topographically, the house is on land that gently slopes toward woods, swamp and ponds behind us. The spring thaw or heavy rain consistently leads to water in the cellar.

After other attempts at a good solution, Jim sank a plastic barrel in the dirt of the old root cellar and installed an automatic sump pump there to supplement the other sump pump already in the main part of the cellar. But instead of simply attaching a hose to direct the water out, he installed plastic pipes that follow the cellar walls and end along a raised bed that currently holds some shrubs.

The last section of piping is anchored to the side of the timbers of the raised bed with brackets, and there's a removable piece that can be added to direct the discharge even farther away from the house in times of great volume.

It is so typically "Jim." It is simple in design, practical in nature and durable. It isn't obtrusive. It's not in the way of other things. And it still works great. Anyone who happens to notice it on the raised bed says, "What is THAT??" I take great delight in explaining. And these days, I take comfort in its presence.

I'm still trying to figure out what to do about the dogs' holes — suggestions welcome — but maybe next time I have a vehicle problem, I will be smart enough to pop the hood.

As a longtime employee of the Bangor Daily News, Julie Harris has served many roles over the years, but she now has her dream job as community editor. She lives in Hermon with her four Brittany dogs: Sassy, Bullet, Thistle and Quincy, who keep her busy in various dog sports. She was widowed at age 51 when her husband, Jim, died of pancreatic cancer. Follow her blog at curves.bangordailynews.com.



JULIE HARRIS