

neighbors helping neighbors

the Wellesley Friendly Aid Society

JENNIFER BLECHER **writer**

driving around many parts of Wellesley, it is easy to make the assumption that Wellesley is a town where everyone lives big. The houses are big, the vehicles are big, and the families are big. But to make that assumption is to overlook the reality that Wellesley is an economically diverse town where people of all income levels reside. Some residents do not have houses, they do not have vehicles, and they do not have families. But luckily, they do have Wellesley Friendly Aid, a privately-funded nonprofit organization that does everything from providing emergency and hardship assistance to people undergoing transition, to offering financial aid for children to attend summer camp, to hosting social luncheons for elderly women, to distributing food vouchers over the holidays, to providing meeting space for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, to lending medical equipment such as walkers, wheelchairs, and shower chairs to people in need.

“When you think of Wellesley, you think of affluence,” says Karen Mondell, Program Administrator for Wellesley Friendly Aid. “You don’t think of people who are in need of support from the community to get by day-to-day. But the town of Wellesley also has public housing, which includes three sites for disabled and elderly residents, and two sites for families. Wellesley Friendly Aid doesn’t exclusively focus on low-income residents, because we have programs for everyone, but a lot of our resources do go into providing for people who live in those facilities.”



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The roots of Wellesley Friendly Aid go back to 1881 when, at a meeting of the newly incorporated town of Wellesley, a vote was taken to appropriate funds for the poor. It was a time of great change for the young town that had a population of roughly 2,500 residents. Wealthy businessmen were being drawn to the area because of its reputation for clean air and beautiful scenery, but so were immigrants, transients, and farmers. Over the next twenty years, the town's population would double, with some residents coming to face such extreme economic hardship that the town voted to open a "poor farm" on the current grounds of the Wellesley Country Club to provide shelter to those in need. As the town's population continued to grow, so did the need for assistance and an informal committee of residents operating under the name "Friendly Aid Committee" was formed. This group did everything from helping a family



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example, imagine you are new to town with limited resources and no furniture. There are places in Massachusetts that provide free donated furniture, but first you need a referral from a service organization. Then you need to find your way to the warehouse to choose the furniture. And then you also need to transport the furniture back to Wellesley. Something as simple as finding a crib for your newborn baby becomes a logistical nightmare. That's where Wellesley Friendly Aid steps in. Maybe they know of someone in town with a crib to donate? Maybe they can find a moving service willing to lend a hand? Maybe they can also help secure clothing and other necessities? Or maybe they are just a friendly voice to point you in the right direction for future services? Whatever the situation, Wellesley Friendly Aid fills a vital gap in

COURTESY OF WELLESLEY FRIENDLY AID

devastated by a house fire, to starting a sewing school so that a "maternity trunk" for impoverished mothers and children would always be fully stocked, to establishing a free bed at the Newton Cottage Hospital (now Newton-Wellesley Hospital), to opening an employment bureau. By 1909, the Friendly Aid Committee was so crucial to the community that it was incorporated into the Wellesley Friendly Aid Association, a private, nonprofit organization with the purpose of "promoting the welfare of the poor, suffering or friendless in Wellesley."

Today, Wellesley Friendly Aid operates under the motto of "neighbors helping neighbors," but its approach to service is just as fluid as it was one hundred years ago and the organization often acts as a catch-all or place of last resort for residents who have nowhere else to go. For

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In addition to helping in times of need, Wellesley Friendly Aid also operates many programs that residents rely on regularly. One of its longest running programs, Friendship Circle, began in 1949 under the original name Circle of Golden Age Group. Run in conjunction with the Wellesley Service League, Friendship Circle is a weekly luncheon meeting (held October through May) of elderly women, many of whom have no family or other social opportunities. For some attendees, it's the only day they leave their homes all week. But what a day it is. Members of Friendship Circle are picked up from their homes by volunteers from the Wellesley Service League and driven to Wellesley Friendly Aid, where they gather in a lovely wood paneled dining room



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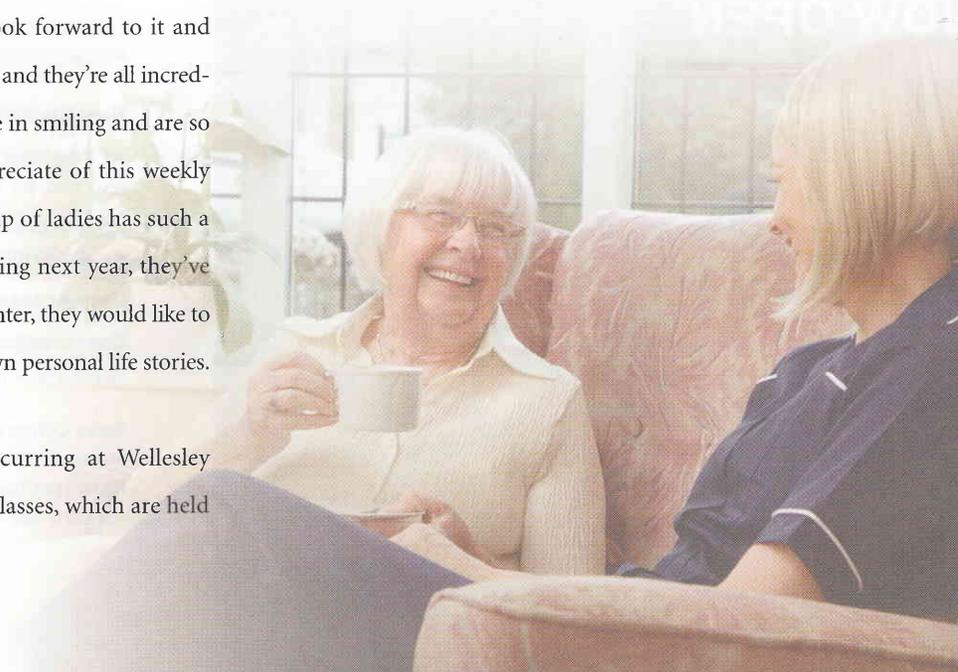
to enjoy presentations by local gardening clubs, musicians, authors, magicians, environmentalists, experts on brain fitness, and many others. “The presenters are phenomenal,” says Aileen Capozzi, one of the Friendship Circle organizers along with Alison Bedenkop. “No one we’ve asked to participate has ever said no.” Afterwards the ladies enjoy a formal lunch of finger sandwiches, salads, and, of course, amazing desserts. Sometimes they go on field trips to local areas of interest like museums and schools.

“The ladies love it!” says Capozzi. “They look forward to it and absolutely love it. It’s an excellent mix of women and they’re all incredibly supportive of each other. They always come in smiling and are so interested in learning more. They’re very appreciate of this weekly event and it’s never, ever dull.” In fact, the group of ladies has such a tight emotional bond that, for their first meeting next year, they’ve decided that instead of inviting an outside presenter, they would like to give each other the opportunity to share their own personal life stories. “They’re an inspiration,” says Capozzi.

Another important program regularly occurring at Wellesley Friendly Aid is English as a Second Language classes, which are held

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in a bright and sunny room on the main floor of the building. While these classes are sponsored by the Wellesley Free Library, they would not be possible without the assistance of Wellesley Friendly Aid, which provides not only the meeting space, but also textbooks and other necessary resources. With attendees ranging from newly transferred international professors, to political refugees, to first generation English speakers, the classes are lively and animated, uniting people from many different cultures through a common goal. “It’s not just a matter of learning English, it’s also about learning about life here,” explains Philippa Biggers, who runs the ESL program and is a Wellesley Friendly Aid board member. “It can be isolating when you



COURTESY OF WELLESLEY FRIENDLY AID SOCIETY

Wellesley Friendly Aid Summer Camp Fund provides money to send anywhere from 40 to 65 children to camp every summer.



move to Wellesley, but through these classes we’ve developed a real sense of community. Some wonderful friendships have developed.”

Of course, it’s not just adults who struggle when faced with financial challenges and other stresses. Children can sometimes have an even harder time, especially when they attend Wellesley Public Schools with classmates who return from school vacations and summer break with tales of exciting adventures. This is where the Wellesley Friendly Aid Summer Camp Fund comes in, providing money to send anywhere from 40 to 65 children to camp every summer. The program is a particular favorite for Peter Johannsen, who has been president of the Wellesley Friendly Aid board for over 30 years. “Summer camp for children who are in financial need can perhaps be more important than for a child who is well off,” says Johannsen. “The poor family and the children don’t have the opportunity to have the life experiences that broaden them and help them grow.”

At the end of the day, Wellesley Friendly Aid is a place for residents to turn when they need help. “Wellesley is a caring town,” says Johannsen. “And we are one of many organizations that help people live a better life.” www.wellesleyfriendlyaid.org



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