

How to live 'til you're 100

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By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — What's the secret to a long life?

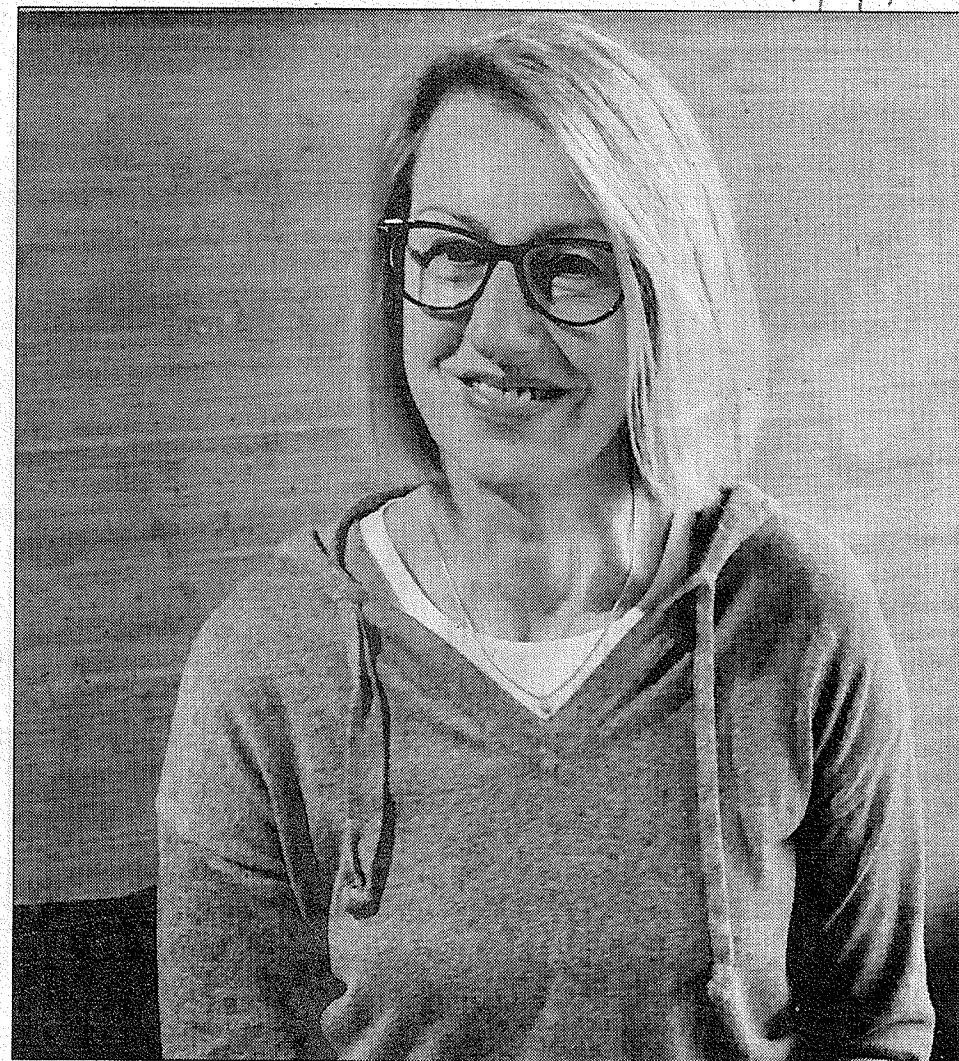
Just ask Shoreline Village CT Director of Services Sylvia DeSantis, recently named the Shoreline's 2018 non-profit staff member of the year by both the Shoreline Chamber of Commerce and the Community Foundations of Branford and Guilford.

First and foremost are the five "blue zones,"—including ones in Italy, Greece, and Costa Rica, as well as Okinawa, Japan, and Loma Linda, CA—where people commonly reach their 90s and 100s, with vastly lower rates of cancer, heart disease, and almost no dementia.

"When you ask them why do you live this long, the number-one reason is social," said the effervescent 61-year-old at a recent interview at G Cafe Bakery in Branford. "They were born there, they were raised there, they worked there, they're involved with their neighbors, their community, and they've never left."

It's that emphasis on social engagement that has informed her work ever since the day, early in her career, when she was working at a clinic for seniors. She walked into a room. In the morning light, two women were lying in their beds, staring into the middle distance. At the sight of her, they instantly brightened.

By then, she had graduated from nursing school with a concentration in geriatrics in her native Bamberg, a medieval town in northern Bavaria found-



Lisa Reisman / Contributed photo

Shoreline Village CT Director of Services, and Shoreline non-profit staff member of the year, Sylvia DeSantis awaiting village members for a recent "tea and talk" gathering at G Cafe Bakery in Branford.

ed in 973 AD.

"Working in geriatric nursing could be depressing and hard, but at that moment, it hit me, 'this is why I'm doing this, because nobody else is checking in on them,'" she said in her gently-accented voice.

"It wasn't so much about the medical part, but the social part. It was about just being there, talking to

them, listening to them. It was about seeing them come to life when they were engaged."

It's precisely that "calling," as she terms it, that has the Branford resident expanding the mission of Shoreline Village CT, a non-profit volunteer-driven organization that seeks, as its website reads, "to enable Shoreline seniors to

continue living independently in their own homes for as long as they want to."

For the woman whom SVCT treasurer Randy Reinhold calls "the glue that makes the village work," it's not just about staying at home. Just as essential is connection. "The people we surround ourselves with strongly influence our health," said

DeSantis, who moved to the U.S. in 1986 with her husband Ron, a Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, whom she'd met in Bamberg, and recently directed the culinary services at the 15 residential colleges at Yale.

"When you're isolated and lonely, that causes depression and that leads to all sorts of health issues and other problems. Engaging in activities with other people is so crucial."

It's likely in part "Sylvia's ability to juggle all (those) volunteer-based activities in the air at the same time" as past president Bob Jaeger put it, that has SVCT, in its fifth year, 120 members strong and growing, with villagers in Branford, Guilford, and Madison, as well as nearby towns east of the Quinipiac River.

Those activities include the monthly "tea and talk" gatherings, the book and movie clubs, and the lectures on art and opera, as well as a twice-weekly stretch and balance class led by president Betsy Frederick. They're all meant to forge, and reinforce, connections among residents.

"You don't have to go to any of these get-togethers regularly," said the mother of two and grandmother of one. "That's fine. But they're always there if you want to go."

SVCT also provides transportation, companionship, and even a daily check-in phone call, according to DeSantis, as well as a Nurse Navigator Program, sponsored by VNA Community Health Care, along with professional resources such as health, legal or financial management services.

Thanks to an anonymous bequest to SVCT last year, there's a new home safety

program as well. So far, the grant has funded a chair lift, an outdoor ramp, and a lightweight transportation chair. There are plans for another member to have a walk-in shower installed.

"The changes afforded by the grant are life-changers," she said. "They're one more way for our members to be able to stay in their homes."

Still, for DeSantis, it always comes back to social engagement—particularly at "tea and talk," where members get together at local cafes to chat. "Everyone is dressed nicely and I get to listen to the members telling stories about their lives, hearing their advice, their wisdom and their wit," she said. "It's a privilege."

And inspiring, too, evidently. "We have a member who's 95, he used to be a Russian professor, and he's so mentally fit, talking about Russia, and languages," she said. "And he's no exception."

The feeling is mutual, it seems. "Sylvia adds a spark," said member Irene Ayres. "She's always available and willing to do whatever you need." For Sue Bender, "she's genuine, she's kind, and she's thoughtful."

"Getting this award is a true honor," DeSantis said. "It wasn't something I expected. I'm just doing what I love to do."

And if that helps the Shoreline become the sixth "blue zone" as a result, so much the better.

For information about Shoreline Village CT, visit shorelinevillagect.org or call 203-747-5939. New members always welcome. For donations, send check to Shoreline Village CT, attn: Sylvia DeSantis, 1204 Main St. Suite 128, Branford, CT 06405.