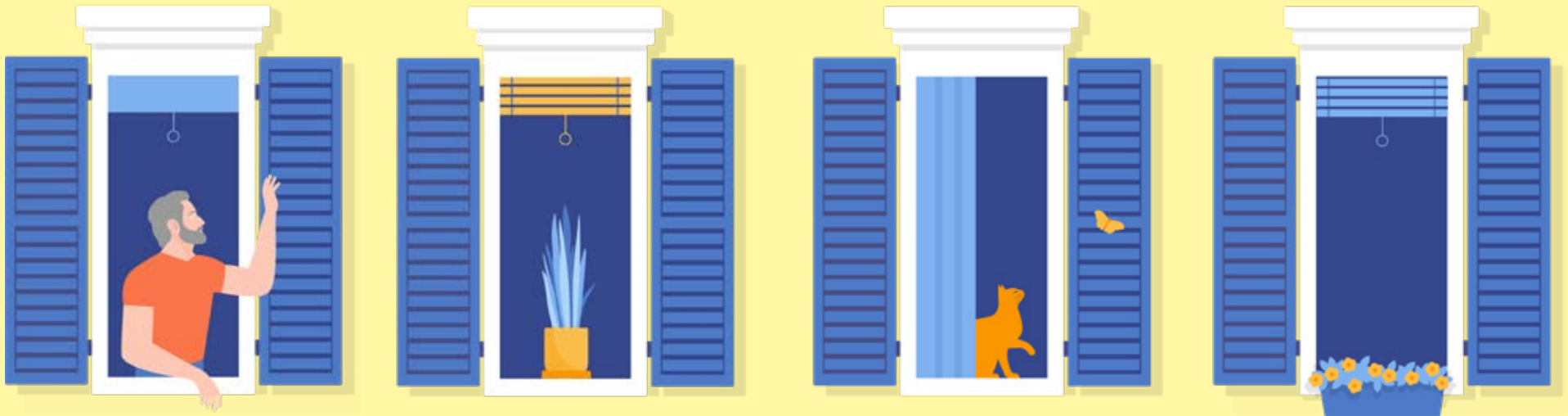




SOLVING *the* LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

*Seniors are leading increasingly isolated lives.
Fortunately, there are many new
initiatives devoted to fostering connection.*

BY Olivier Van Caembèke



“Did your newspaper not get delivered today? How are we going to make plans for our next movie outing?” Céline G.* teases her friend Gérard Q., 88.

“Don’t worry,” he replies. “I got one from the newsstand.”

Céline, a dynamic 46-year-old with short, dark hair, resumes her joking: “You were unfaithful the other day; you went to see *Another World* without me!”

Gérard smiles broadly as the conversation continues. Dressed in a tan-coloured sweater and brown velvet pants, with carefully combed grey hair, he takes pride in his appearance. The pair talk about international news, the exhibitions they would like to see, their respective families, and more.

They are sitting in the living room of Gérard’s home, located on a quiet street in Uccle, an affluent area in the greater Brussels region. Its walls are adorned with paintings; on a low glass coffee table lie books about Belgian architect Victor Horta and the history of the French island of Noirmoutier. Céline and Gérard have known each other just six months, but they share

a curiosity about the world and a passion for culture. They met through Bras Dessus Bras Dessous (which translates as “Arm in Arm”), an association that brings together older, isolated people with younger neighbors who sign up to spend time with them regularly.

The Belgian association, which operates in and around Brussels, was founded by Céline Remy in 2016. The former financial management consultant had always enjoyed organizing



Bras Dessus Bras Dessous volunteer Céline G. chats with her friend Gérard Q. at his home in Uccle, Brussels.

gatherings for her neighbors, but she noticed in recent years that the seniors among them were pulling away. “They were cutting themselves off from the world and no longer participating in the parties,” she says. “Something had to be done.”

It took her six months to set up the Bras Dessus Bras Dessous buddy system. Today, the association has 11 employees, and 350 seniors have been matched with as many volunteers. “We don’t replace other relationships,” insists Remy. The volunteers—whose average age is 35—aren’t surrogate family members or caregivers; they are neighbors focused on building and strengthening friendships.

Originally from southwestern France,

Céline lived in Germany before settling in Brussels with her husband and young daughter. She has been a French teacher and a corporate travel agent but isn’t currently working. “I have always enjoyed interacting with the elderly and never viewed them as ‘in decline’ or as ‘less than,’” she says. “By giving a bit of my time, I feel useful, like I have a role to play.”

Gérard, for his part, has been on his own since his wife died of cancer in 2016. He has four children, two of whom live in Belgium, and six grandchildren whom he doesn’t see as often as he would like. Despite a history of cardiac issues, he is very independent—which he values, as he hopes to live in his home as long as possible.

ILLUSTRATION, PREVIOUS SPREAD: ©MARIA VORONOVICH/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO: OLIVIER VAN CAEMERBÈKE

* Subjects preferred that their surnames not be published.

Every Tuesday Gérard goes out to play bridge but says “that’s mostly to kill time.”

What really keeps him motivated, and cheers him up when he’s feeling blue, is his relationship with Céline. “These volunteers are amazing,” he says. “My wife was very social, but I’m

IN ADDITION TO BEING A MENTAL-HEALTH ISSUE, LONELINESS IS A PUBLIC-HEALTH CONCERN.

the opposite. Reaching out to others isn’t easy for a man of my generation. So, after her death, loneliness fell upon me.”

A HEALTH RISK & A SOCIAL ISSUE

LONELINESS. THE WORD can instantly conjur vivid memories and preconceived notions. But what is it, exactly? According to the UK-based organization Campaign to End Loneliness, it is the absence of a significant person in one’s life—a partner or friend—with whom a close attachment or meaningful relationship exists. It’s also the lack of a wider social network of friends, neighbors, or colleagues.

The World Health Organization (WHO) contends that high-quality social connections are essential for our mental and physical health, regardless of our age. Yet isolation and loneliness are widespread among seniors, says the WHO: Between 20 and 34 percent of older people in China, Europe, Latin America, and the United States are lonely.

Still, the mere existence of relationships isn’t enough to erase loneliness, says Jean-François Serres, founder of a network of loneliness initiatives across France called MONALISA – Mobilisation nationale contre l’isolement des âgées (or National mobilization against the isolation of the elderly). “Social connections must make the isolated person feel that they are a fully fledged human being and not just an object to care for or a mouth to feed,” he says.

Cécile Van de Velde agrees. The professor of sociology at the University of Montreal and holder of the Canada Research Chair on Social Inequalities and Life Journeys, says that older people who tell her they suffer from loneliness regularly refer to themselves as ghosts. “This loneliness often seems inescapable to them,” she says, and they are drawn into a downward spiral.

The experts we spoke to agree that seniors are increasingly lonely. One reason is our evolving world. Serres points out that 50 years ago, multiple generations tended to live together, or



Simone Marcelin and her young friend Maxine share a laugh in Juniville, France.

in close geographical proximity.

“At birth, we were assigned a role and a place, and could benefit from a history of relationships built by our elders,” he says. “Today we are freer to make our own choices—and it’s hard to complain about that! But the downside is that as we age, our professional, family, and community networks dry up.”

And, as Van de Velde points out, the outside world doesn’t appeal to older people as much as it did when they were younger. “Therefore, it takes a lot of willpower to get out of the house. If you go hiking you now walk more slowly than others; you can no longer manage the stairs at a museum; you are a little slow at the

supermarket checkout. This is why some seniors choose to remain in a bubble—one that is both reassuring and destructive.”

In addition to being a mental-health issue, loneliness is a public-health concern. Lonely people are more prone to depression and are more likely to adopt risky behaviors such as alcohol dependence, smoking, or a sedentary lifestyle. This makes them more vulnerable to cardiovascular diseases. In fact, according to various studies, loneliness increases the risk of premature death by 26 percent. Coronary heart disease risk increases by 29 percent, stroke risk goes up by 32 percent, and the risk of developing dementia rises by 40 percent.

PHOTO: OLIVIER VAN CAEMERBÈKE

A VARIETY OF SOLUTIONS

PROGRAMS LIKE BRAS Dessus Bras Dessous are part of the solution. “The goal is to alleviate an elderly person’s loneliness by letting them know that they can count on someone,” says Serres. “But it’s even better if they can feel that they are important to someone else.”

This is exactly what is happening through an initiative in Juniville, in

“WE MUST LISTEN, GATHER, INVOLVE, AND SEEK OUT SENIORS,” SAYS CÉCILE VAN DE VELDE.

northeastern France.

“We want a bib, too!” Christiane Lantenois, 83, says cheerfully while throwing an amused glance at her friend, Simone Marcelin, 85. The women then tie tiny bibs around their necks in an effort to entertain their tablemates, three-year-old Charlotte and two-year-old Maxine—and it works.

It’s afternoon snack time at the Marpa Lucie Gabreau, a non-medical residence for the elderly. There

are nearly 200 Marpas across France, but this one is unlike the others: At least once a week residents receive a visit from children who attend a day-care center located in the retirement home’s garden. The kids range from six months to three-and-a-half years old, while the average age of the seniors is 87. Decades may separate them but everything else brings them together.

Four tables have been set up for today’s communal snack, each hosting at least two children and two to four seniors. Sitting next to Simone at the first one, little Maxine grabs a paper napkin and gently wipes a few crumbs of brioche from her elderly friend’s mouth. Meanwhile, Christiane calls out to a nursery assistant that young Charlotte has finished her drink.

Violaine Bonnard, a former pediatric nurse, came up with the idea of building ties between the daycare facility and the retirement home. “Spending time with the children helps the seniors work on their motor skills and their memory, and it boosts their morale,” she says.

The “grandmas” and “grandpas,” as the kids call them, really look forward to their visits and do things like help the youngsters put on their coats, teach them the names of plants in the garden, or hold the spoons of those who need assistance eating. “The seniors mean a lot to the children. And through that they rediscover an identity beyond being just a resident here,”

JUST HOW LONELY ARE EUROPE’S SENIORS?

In February 2022, Melody Ding, an epidemiologist and population behavioural scientist at the University of Sydney in Australia, produced a summary of 17 studies of loneliness among seniors. Covering 30 European countries between the years 2000 and 2019, her analysis found that it’s in eastern Europe—including in Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia—that the elderly suffer most from loneliness, at an average of more than 20 percent. In southern European countries like Greece, Italy, and Portugal, nearly 16 percent of seniors said they were lonely.

One study from 2016 found that nine percent of EU citizens over the age of 65 felt lonely “most or all of the time.” Eighteen percent of Romanians and 17 percent of Hungarians reported being affected—but only two percent of Swedes and Danes.

“Northern Europeans seem to be less prone to loneliness than those in the south, even though they are often more isolated,” notes

economist Béatrice d’Hombres, a researcher and policy analyst at the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre.

To explain this paradox, she points out that in countries with a Latin culture, the instinct to be connected is strong. “This weighs on the person with fewer social contacts than others, even if, compared to what a Dane or a Swede experiences, they seem well surrounded.”

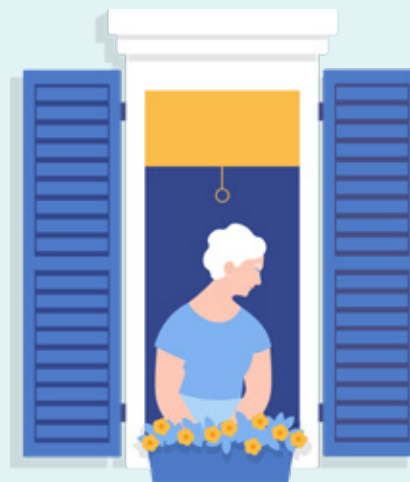


ILLUSTRATION: ©MARIA VORONOVICH/GETTY IMAGES

says Bonnard.

Anne-Marie Bouchez, 92, has been living at the Marpa for three years. “These children add life to our lives. And they push us to be in better physical shape, because we need to keep up with the rascals!”

Karline Soudée, manager of the Juniville Marpa, sees the benefits for the residents. “During these shared mo-



IN 2021, THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT APPOINTED A MINISTER IN CHARGE OF TACKLING LONELINESS.

ments, they don’t experience pain and don’t complain about anything,” she says with a smile. “They feel important when they can soothe a child or teach them to crack an egg to make a cake.”

For the residents who rarely see their own grandchildren, these are some of the only times they get to experience intergenerational bonding. “The lack of contact with family was less of an issue when we opened our doors 15 years ago,” says Christian Cogniard, president of the Marpa and the mayor of Juniville.

To adjust to this new reality, the Marpa team has added more activities

for the seniors. “But easing the loneliness of a person over 80 who has had to leave their home isn’t a simple matter,” says Cogniard.

Cécile Van De Velde of the University of Montreal explains that we all must contribute to the overall solution.

“We must listen, gather, involve, and seek out seniors,” she says. “We need to have dedicated telephone numbers that people can call for help. We need to bring groups together through neighborhood parties, community cafés, and outings. We need to involve those who want to play a civic role through volunteering.” And, she says, we must reach out to the most isolated people by going door-to-door, and by creating monitoring networks made up of neighbors and local merchants.

The good news is that the number and types of initiatives to help people feel less alone are increasing. They come from ordinary citizens, organizations, and governments.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, Japan appointed a minister in charge of tackling loneliness. The United Kingdom has had such a position since 2018, and also has an association called Age UK, which offers older people 30 minutes a week of phone time with trained volunteers known as “telephone friends.”

In Sweden, the SällBo, located in the coastal city of Helsingborg, is a unique intergenerational residence.

Opened in 2019, it has 51 apartments, 31 of which are rented to people over 70 years old, and the rest to young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. The residents have signed a contract pledging to spend at least two hours a week together—whether to chat, cook, lend a hand, or take part in cultural activities.

Some Dutch and French supermarkets have dedicated checkouts for customers who wish to chat with the cashier; in the Netherlands they are called Kletskaassa, and in France they are known as BlaBla Caisses. Also in France, the national postal service has the initiative Veiller sur mes parents (“Watch over my parents”), through which a senior can receive regular visits from a mail carrier, who then relays details of the encounters for relatives.

IN BRUSSELS, SHORTLY before they part ways, Gérard Q. and Céline G. plan their next outings. “The Van Buuren Museum isn’t far, and it has a beautiful garden. Shall we visit?” asks Céline.

“Good idea,” answers Gérard.

“And how about going out for a meal?” Céline suggests mischievously, knowing that her friend avoids places he considers too busy or noisy.

But a twinkle in Gérard’s eyes shows that his interest has been piqued, and he agrees. Why not? It’s good to shake up your daily routine—especially when you’re not alone.

If we look around, we can see that

the associations, collectives, and community projects committed to addressing the issue of isolation among the elderly are more dynamic than ever.

Jean-François Serres is optimistic. “The fact that people are concerned about seniors’ loneliness is a very good sign,” he says. “Indeed, the solution lies within all of us.” ♦