

## Being a companion to elders is valuable for all involved

BY LOIS BELL

SHERIDAN SENIOR CENTER

SHERIDAN — Hanley Cohn looks forward to his weekly visits from Don Knievel. Their visits are simple, sometimes just talking, sometimes driving around wherever the spirit moves them.

“We’ll go to a different coffee house a couple times a week,” Cohn said. “He’s (Knievel) shown me things I haven’t seen in a long time.”

Cohn and Knievel connected through a national Senior Companions program. Its goal is to support independent living for elders through people connections. The program was started locally by the Sheridan Senior Center in the 1970s and utilizes community volunteers to serve as companions to older residents.

Individuals interested in being or having a companion contact the Senior Center. If companions are available then they are matched based on compatibility before being introduced to the applicant. There is no fee to elders or their families for a Senior Companion.

Under the national program, Senior Companion candidates must be interviewed and agree to a background check and physical.

Once approved, Senior Companions must meet a minimum number of visitation hours each week and turn in timesheets and mileage reports. To meet program hours, Senior Companions visit with three or more clients weekly.

Haley Roberts, director of Volunteer Services at the Senior Center and Michelle Keller, the Senior Center services coordinator in the Tongue River Valley, have a vision to expand the companion program; they have added a Sheridan Companions and Tongue River Companions component to work in tandem with the current Senior Companion program. They see the additions as appealing to potential volunteers.

“Under these companion programs, a volunteer can work with just one elder,” Roberts said. “All companions will be required to have a background check but Sheridan Companions and Tongue River Valley Companions are not required to pass a physical exam or meet minimum weekly program hours.”

Keller’s goal is to engage three Tongue River Companions locally in the Tongue River Valley communities where they are requested. Her thought is to utilize Tongue River

Valley volunteers.

Today, three Senior Companions visit with 16 elder residents in Sheridan, many who may not have a visit from anyone else.

Each companion brings their individual uniqueness to the program. Knievel, a man in a program primarily filled by women, fills a unique niche for elder men.

“Guys this age have dedicated their lives to work,” Knievel said. “You connect with them differently from women, maybe through what they’ve done.”

Knievel discovered the power of using photos to kick off a relationship.

“I’ll look for photos that we can talk about when we get together,” Knievel said. It’s an “in” that is working for Knievel.

Friendships develop. Knievel discovered a rich history in Cohn and his family. Cohn served in the U.S. Navy during World War II transporting Marines to Iwo Jima, Saipan and the Philippines. Cohn’s father, Cohn Sr., was the first pilot to fly mail to Sheridan.

Cohn was a photographer at the Rochford Studios in Sheridan.

“We got the first color picture printed in Sheridan,” Cohn said. “It took us three hours to



COURTESY PHOTO | LOIS BELL

Senior companions such as Don Knievel (left) are a bright spot for community elders such as veteran Hanley Cohn. The Senior Center oversees the Senior Companion program matching volunteer companions to elders who are living independently in their homes. Many of these elders may have no other visitor during the week. Companions visit with an elder for one hour or more on a regular schedule.

process.” The photo now hangs over Cohn’s bed.

Knievel has hit on something: there are benefits to the companions also. Co-Senior Companion Margie Pierce confirms this. Pierce has been a senior companion since 1974 after she suffered a stroke and lost her job as a result.

“I didn’t want to do much of anything,” Pierce said. “I thought I wasn’t any good for anything.”

Shelley Powley, the activities director at the Senior

Center then, suggested to Pierce that she become a senior companion.

Pierce was all in. She began as a companion to elders in her apartment complex. When she moved, Pierce became a companion to elders in her new apartment building. Pierce continues to work with older adults today. It’s even a more perfect fit as Pierce no longer drives.

Pierce estimates she has been a companion to almost 20 individuals over

the years.

Roberts invites those interested in learning more about volunteering as a companion to contact her at the Sheridan Senior Center at 672-2240. There is a high demand for male volunteer companions but both men and women companions are invited.

“It’s enjoyable. You get to meet seniors and you get to help them,” Pierce said. “If you work and help someone else, it makes you feel better.”

### CENTER STAGE |

## Empowered to live with diabetes

I was skeptical at first when I read in a press release in The Press about a diabetes class (Diabetes Education and Empowerment Program due to start at the Senior Center on Feb. 10).

As a type 1 diabetic (30 years) I have survived many life threatening events including coma, Ketoacidosis,

seizures, insulin shock and falling unconscious on the sidewalk. I doubted whether I would feel comfortable in a room with “new” and pre-diabetics.

Since there has been nothing to speak of in the Sheridan area for diabetics, I decided it would be affirming to be in a class

with other diabetics — no matter where they are on their journey.

I am so glad that I signed up. After the first class I was so uplifted I was moved to tears.

The teachers — Dominique Pereira,

Ramon Stine and Kathy Schonenbach, R.N. — were energetic, caring and knowledgeable about diabetes.

These teachers must be commended on the considerable effort that they put into preparing for each class. They brought visual aids, hand-outs and hand-drawn illustrations.

Each week we filled out action plans. Based on the instructions, we brought in books: Dr. Bernstein’s “Diabetes Solution and Diabetes Cooking for Dummies.” We also brought our glucometers, blood pressure cuffs and recorded our numbers each week. These tasks were implemented to instill good diabetes management and self-awareness.

We laughed...a lot.

One of the things I enjoyed about the class was the interactive exercises. We got up and moved around and got to know each other.

We laughed some more.

There were two speakers. Georgia Boley, the nutritionist at the Senior Center, spoke to the class about the importance of good nutrition in a diabetic life.

Dr. Mclaws, podiatrist, spoke about the importance of good foot care. It was a revelation to hear him — a medical professional — advocate for the use of vitamin B for nerve pain and damage. Remember the old days when you couldn’t even tell your doctor you were taking this or that? How times have changed.

Healthy snacks were served each week. I must commend the Senior Center kitchen staff for the work involved in preparing our snacks. All recipes, including calories, fat grams and carbs, were included in our packets.

A lot of information was shared. On the last day (Week 6) we were each given a certificate of completion signed by the three teachers proving that we had completed the Diabetes Education and Empowerment Program.

How empowering is that?

LUCINDA STOUFFER is a recent graduate of the Diabetes Education and Empowerment program. Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan Community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.



LUCINDA STOUFFER



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### SENIOR CENTER HAPPENINGS |

- Only 11 days to the 2016 Keystone Awards on April 21! The Keystone Awards honor individuals who have made significant contributions to our community! Tickets are available at the WYO Theater. Special price for those registered with the Sheridan Senior Center.

- Are you willing to make a difference in an older adult’s life? The Sheridan Senior Center is looking for volunteer companions for older adults. You can be a bright spot to one or more elders just by visiting with them. To inquire about details, contact Haley Roberts, director of Volunteer Services, at the Sheridan Senior Center at 672-2240. In the Tongue River Valley, contact Michelle Keller at 655-9419.

- The Senior Center’s annual cinnamon roll bake sale is April 14, 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. (or while supplies last). \$2 per roll. Bottomless cup of coffee included at 211 Smith St. Proceeds support Senior Center services. (please note that the date has changed from April 8 as published in the Senior Center’s Spring Center Stage newsletter).

- Diabetes Education and Empowerment Program with tips on empowering you with your diabetes (or pre-diabetes). This is a six-week free course open to all ages beginning April 19, 5:30-8 p.m. in the Senior Center’s Community Room. Call the

Senior Center at 672-2240 to reserve your spot. Must complete an enrollment packet prior to the first class. The packets are available at the front desk of the Senior Center at 211 Smith St.

- April 10–16 is National Volunteer Week! Thank your volunteers and let them know how valuable they are to your organization!

- The Senior Center is offering two upcoming day trips:

- Eaton’s Dude Ranch tour and picnic on May 5. Deadline to pay is April 28.
- Devil’s Tower tour and picnic on May 27. Deadline to pay is May 10.

Payment required to reserve your spot. Call the Senior Center at 672-2240 for details or stop by at 211 Smith Street Mondays through Fridays for details.

- Another great get-away with the Senior Center! Deadwood History and Casino Trip Aug. 29–Sept. 1. Package includes round trip transportation from the Senior Center, three nights lodging; welcome reception, \$56 in meal vouchers, \$40 in slot play, \$6 in blackjack match play, free slot tournament entry and one day tour of historic Deadwood and Lead area. Cost is \$420 per person with a roommate. Call Jean Harm at 672-2240 Mondays through Thursdays for more information.



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