

Community Building at the YMCA of Greater Westfield

“My friends are my estate” Emily Dickinson

Though it seems the great American poet, Emily Dickinson, lived a rather introverted and reclusive life, she inherently knew the value of friendship. In her insightful statement, she subtly proclaims that her friends are what give her sustenance in life, just as an estate, comprised of a person’s material assets, offers stability and the means to live.

It’s no secret, we all need and want friends in our lives. But wanting and needing does not necessarily lead to having. Our community structures have changed over the years. Immigrants who came to America in the early 20th century often forged lifetime friendships that developed without much conscious effort, because they lived and worked with one another in close proximity day after day. Today’s world is quite different. We are a much more transient society and many of us live in isolated neighborhoods. Telecommuting or working at home are common. Many are unemployed or working several part time jobs. The fact is, that connecting with others in a live, face to face way on a regular basis can be difficult.

Sure, there is Facebook and Twitter and lots of other ways to connect with others through cyberspace technology, and these can be, if used with discretion, useful tools. But they simply cannot replace the day to day support that we need and derive from live human beings. You know, like the support of a friend taking you out to dinner after a tough day at work or having your friends stop by and visit when you’re laid up with an injury at home or getting together with a group of friends to play cards.

Of course the question arises, how does one make this happen? The tough thing is that it seems to become harder as you get older, because people leave the workforce and lose that daily social connection that comes with it.

Well, I have some very good news for you about friendship and community and that is the YMCA. Let me preface that by saying, this is not a propaganda story, this is truly an everyday reality at the Y. And I will add not just at my Y, the YMCA of Greater Westfield, but every Y.

Right now, sitting on my desk are about 50 stories about members who have found friendship, community, and support at our Y. This represents only a small smattering of the countless stories that have been shared through the 123 years that the Westfield Y has been in existence. I have condensed two of them here just to give you a flavor of the impact that the Y has had on people’s lives.

One of our members had a bad fall in an exercise class and went to the hospital. The members of the class called and visited at the hospital and then her home. Members of other classes even called and visited. Our front desk staff called and visited and sent cards. The member had surgery and after a long recovery returned to class, nervous, but really wanting to be back. Today, she is thrilled to be back with her fellow class mates and is getting stronger and healthier everyday. She has often expressed how grateful she is to her friends at the Y for their time and support.

Another woman discovered the Y after meeting one of our reception desk staff members at a local retail shop. She and the staff person engaged in a conversation in which she revealed that she was living with her daughter and was pretty lonely during the day and needed something to do. The staff member told her about the Y and gave her the phone number of our Active Older Adults Director, Carol Palmer. Well, she called and spoke with Carol and now comes to our AOA classes. She was so grateful for the reference that she called the staff member at the Y and thanked her.

You see, the Y is not just about providing quality exercise classes or swim lessons or strength training equipment. Yes, we do all that and much more, but the real gem of the Y is in providing multiple and diversified experiences all under one roof that just can't be replicated anywhere else in quite the same way. Those experiences are weaving human connections, forging friendships that offer life giving sustenance; the kind that enriches our lives far beyond estates and piles of material treasures.

To learn more about the Y, visit us on our website, www.westfieldymca.org, or check our Facebook page. But better yet, meet us face to face – come in for a tour, we'd love to meet you. You can also try out any of our fitness classes for free for the first time. We are located at 67 Court Street in Westfield and our phone number is 413-568-8631. Hope to see you sometime!

Rosann Scalise

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