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DIVERSITY

I hope you had the opportunity to enjoy Laconia's Multicultural Market Day last Saturday. It is a wonderful way that our community comes together to celebrate diversity of all kinds. The celebration has just the right amount of fanfare and pageantry – enough to give it structure but not so much that it takes away from the feeling that it is all a magically spontaneous event! Special thanks are due to all who make it happen!

Diversity is not limited to cultural and ethnic differences – it can also be thought of in broader terms including age, gender, physical ability, political orientation, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, dietary preferences --- or any other aspect of our lives that helps to define who we are as a person. It is great to see that as a community we have come to see how diversity of all kinds enriches our community and makes it better.

Diversity takes on all kinds of expression from clothing, to music and as well demonstrated at Multicultural Market Day – by food. Food has a way of crossing all kinds of boundaries. Tastes and smells transcend any language difficulties and invite newcomers to experience some 'non-traditional' culinary experiences. There was certainly all kinds of variety available last Saturday!

As we move forward we are going to need to be sure that we do not marginalize older people because of preconceived ideas of what it means to be 'older'. While this subtle prejudice towards elders is not mean spirited -- it still has the same effect that happens when broad assumptions are made about any segment of the population. The fact of the matter is that there is very little that we can generalize about based solely on a person's age.

I will admit to being amused in watching some people who when they first meet someone in a wheelchair begin to shout at them! For reasons unknown to me they assume that if someone cannot walk – that they must also be hearing impaired! In a very similar manner it is easy for us to see a change in any one

ability and to assume that means changes in others. There is nothing about using a cane or a walker that suggests any diminished mental abilities. Older people with any kind of obvious physical challenges are oftentimes marginalized by being treated as a 'patient' instead of a 'person'.

One Saturday at just before midnight a couple of weeks ago we welcomed one of newest Members. He had driven himself up from New York City but complications in getting started meant getting here later than he would have liked. Now as it turns out he uses a wheelchair and is fiercely independent about doing everything for himself. He understands that doing things for himself is more important than doing it quickly with any unneeded assistance of others. It's not that he doesn't appreciate help – it's just that he never want help to come at the expense of independence. He understands that doing things differently is perfectly OK.

Sometimes we think that discrimination/marginalization is necessarily mean spirited – but its not. Oftentimes it is done with the best of intentions as we try to 'help' others with things that they can otherwise do themselves. While we might be helping to accomplish a 'task' we do so at the risk of robbing that person of a sense of independence and dignity. We all need to learn to be a bit more patient.

The wonderful part of all this is that when you let go of your stereotypes of older people – especially those who have physical challenges of some kind – you are going to discover that behind that perceived 'disability' will be a dynamic person with all kinds of things to share!

Laconia's Multicultural Market Day is a wonderful opportunity for each of us to renew our commitment to let go of all the preconceived notions and ideas that only tend to make our own lives smaller. Diversity makes our lives better!

And please – Don't yell at someone you meet who happens to be in a wheelchair!

Age Well!

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