

A Fruitful Year for the Vital Aging Network

The Vital Aging Network is a network of individuals and organizations that believe in and support the idea of keeping our lives healthy, engaged, and vital as we age.

We invite you to take a look at what the VAN network accomplished in 2011—and to think about how you might get more involved in 2012.

Forums

VAN Forums offer an opportunity to learn about topics of interest to people 50+, get questions answered, and connect with others in the network. In 2011, VAN offered forums on lifelong learning, assistive technology, social networking, fighting fraud, being active in your community, getting outdoors, and housing for life.

VAN partnered with Mature Voices Minnesota to provide a very popular forum on Medicare options in Roseville, Bloomington, and Duluth. In each of the forums, VAN collaborated with other organizations, including the Minnesota Board on Aging, Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging, City of Bloomington, Courage Center, The Senior Reporter, AARP, BBB, and others.

Expanded Reach in Diverse Communities and “Be the Change” Program

VAN continued to broaden its reach to individuals from diverse populations in 2011. Through funding from The Saint Paul Foundation, VAN developed a two-hour workshop called **Be the Change: Making a Difference in Your Community**. The workshop raises awareness among people 50+ about the need to be actively engaged in their communities and helps them discover how to get involved.

VAN collaborated with three community organizations that represent diverse communities—Hamline Midway Elders, the Oromo Community of Minnesota,



and Little Brothers - Friends of the Elderly—and customized the workshop to each group’s particular needs. The workshop has been held in the Hamline Midway community and in the Oromo community. A third workshop is scheduled for January 26 at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church on Johnson Parkway in Saint Paul. Little Brothers - Friends of the Elderly is recruiting participants with a focus on attracting individuals from the Hmong, Latino, and African American communities.

The Be the Change workshop has been well received by both the older adults who participate and the partnering organizations. VAN is excited about the potential of this program as a gateway for engaging the talent, experience, and energy of older adults from all races, ethnic groups, and economic backgrounds in making their communities better places to live.

Evolve: Re-igniting Self & Community

VAN’s **Evolve: Re-igniting Self & Community** course attracts a diverse group of (mostly) people 50+ who are interested in setting the course for this stage of their lives, honing their leadership skills, and applying their talents to improve our lives together.

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The American Society on Aging (ASA) and others have reported extensively on the benefits of civic engagement for older adults and for our communities.

According to several sources being civically engaged can add years to your life and increase your satisfaction. Nancy Henkin and Jenny Zapt address the potential for our communities: "Tapping the skills, knowledge and experience of older adults . .

. may be our most effective strategy for revitalizing communities and promoting successful aging." (*Generations*, Winter 2006-07)

As they age, people want to remain relevant, use their skills and experience, and contribute to something that makes a positive difference (*Generation Ageless*, Smith and Clurman). Yet, there are few avenues for people 50+ to stay connected, be involved, or develop the skills they need to contribute effectively in their communities. The eight-month Evolve course creates a cohort of older adult who learn together, support each other, and take action on the issues they care about.

During the 2010–2011 school year, VAN once again partnered with the Minnesota College and University System (MnSCU) to offer Evolve (formerly called ALVA Leadership Development) at Century College, Inver Hills Community College, North Hennepin Community College, and Saint Cloud Technical and Community College. In May 2011, 53 individuals graduated from the program.

Each participant of the Evolve class designs and completes a project that has a positive impact on the lives of children, older adults, immigrant

populations, and others in areas such as health, education, nutrition, the arts and improved use

of community services. In the 2010–2011 class, Teena Bacigalupi started a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support group in her Pine City community, Ertra Deressa developed a plan to reduce isolation for Oromo elders, John Bowden started an intergenerational reading project for Clearview Elementary School, and Marianne Moulson created

a speakers bureau for the Greater Minneapolis Crisis Nursery. Other participants completed equally compelling projects. In the process, participants develop skills that will help them provide ongoing leadership in their communities.

Through funding from the New York Life Foundation, VAN expanded the Evolve program to Denver and Seattle in 2011. In preparation for this expansion, VAN partnered with tpt (Twin Cities Public Television) to produce professional quality videos of distinguished leaders addressing key concepts related to civic leadership. These videos, which provide the backbone of the content of the course, are tightly edited segments. They include: *Wise Leadership*, *Working Collaboratively*, *Embracing Opportunities* and *Overcoming Barriers*, and other topics. In addition, tpt produced a half-hour television program, *Community Leadership After 50*, using the interviews. The program has aired on tpt's Minnesota Channel and tpt Life. [Watch the program online.](#)

VAN also strengthened its partnership with Sage Presence, the award-winning team of Dean Hyers and Pete Machalek, to introduce the idea of story structure to Evolve participants. SagePresence created a series of professional quality videos and





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a set of exercises to help participants think, talk about, and present their ideas.

Evolve is on track to offer the class in both the Twin Cities and several greater Minnesota communities in 2012–2013.

EvolvingConnections, the association of Evolve/ALVA alumni founded by Evolve grads, offered a series of **Book & Brew** sessions during 2011. These sessions use an innovative book scan process that engages everyone in getting to know the book without prior reading. It's fun and informative. In addition, EvolvingConnections hosted several social gatherings during the year.

AmeriCorps

During 2011, VAN and the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging (MAAA) were awarded a planning grant by ServeMN to develop a plan for an AmeriCorps program for people 50+. The program developed would engage teams of self-directed older adults to help communities become more age friendly. Due to budget constraints, the implementation of the program was not funded. This work demonstrates how VAN's leadership development can be taken to a deeper level of engaging older adults in community work with the potential to produce substantial outcomes.

Website and e-Bulletins

VAN has a robust website—www.vital-aging-network.org—with extensive information on a wide variety of topics of interest to people 50+. Click “Resources for Vital Living” on the right side of the website page to access articles on caregiving, creative arts, finances, health and fitness, learning, legal issues and many more topics.

VAN publishes e-Bulletins to our list of subscribers throughout the year with original articles, information about new resources, opportunities for volunteering, and a listing of upcoming events. Click “[Subscribe](#)” in the upper right corner of www.vital-aging-network.org to receive the e-Bulletin by email.

Network Building Get Together

Wendy Lustbader, distinguished author of several books including *Life Gets Better*, was the guest of honor at VAN's first “network building” get together held on September 12. The event was well attended and lively (with a cash bar). Watch your email for additional network building get togethers. It's a great way to be a part of the network!

Thank you to everyone in the network for making 2011 a productive and rewarding year!