



Theater Barn board member Missy Slaymaker-Hanlon with Abigail Cahill Kagan and Peter Coffin, of the Library board.

Board Approval

THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY LEADERS EMERGES

BY | AMANDA BERGEN

“HE’S JUST STARTED teething.” “Getting on the travel team was so exciting for him.” No, that isn’t chatter at Ballard Park playground. It is conversation recently overheard before a board meeting at a local community organization. What is the relevance to the business at hand? you might ask. None at all. But the topics of conversation are a telling sign of a small movement afoot in Ridgefield. At board meetings and fundraisers, a new generation is stepping up.

Younger residents are joining the ranks of the local volunteer corps. And they’re not just coordinating email blasts—they’re making serious, long-term commitments.

For example, board chairs at the Ridgefield Library, the Community Center, and the Theater Barn are all in their early to mid-40s. The Visiting Nurses Association and the Ridgefield Symphony have recently added to their boards a number of members with small children. “Volunteerism in Ridgefield

has always been strong,” says Sue Manning, former first selectman and generous donor of her time and skills. “The next generation hasn’t fully begun to take over, but my sense is it’s starting to happen.”

One of the main reasons boards and committees tend to skew older is because of availability. Given the rat race of modern-day professional and family life, from carpooling to dance recitals to business travel, many parents of younger children feel they just don’t have

the extra time to give. “Volunteerism in general is changing,” says Stephanie Pelletier, executive director of the Community Center. As a nation, she says, we aren’t as service-oriented as we used to be. These days people are very selective about to what and how they donate their time. One of the biggest challenges is finding a babysitter. “It’s a deal-breaker for volunteerism,” says Pelletier.

Nevertheless, more and more 30-somethings appear to be finding the time

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to volunteer. Take Missy Slaymaker-Hanlon. In addition to juggling play dates and car pools, this young mom also finds the time to sit on the board at the Theater Barn.

At a recent VNA flu clinic, Executive Director Theresa Santoro reflected on the influx of young volunteers. "Health-conscious members of the sandwich generation are simultaneously caring for their children and their parents," Santoro states. "They want to support our in-home health-care services."

When 42-year-old Abigail Cahill Kagan, mother of three youngsters, decided she wanted

to play a more active role in the community, she put a lot of research into the decision. "I wanted to join a place that was family-friendly but one that also allows me the opportunity to be with adults that have like interests," she says. She joined the Library Advisory Board and is working diligently on the library-expansion effort, alongside the chairman of the board, 40-year-old Peter Coffin. Both Kagan and Coffin acknowledge the time commitment of volunteering and the effect it has on family life. "There are times when the kids haven't seen me one night

that week," says Coffin, of DCA Architects. But for them and others, donating time to organizations is as important as helping kids with their homework. Says Kagan: "If you want it, you have to invest in it."

Many local organizations find that younger members help reach new patrons, especially in an increasingly digital world. "It's important to have the young crowd involved for the fresh ideas they bring to the table," says Sue Manning, "Otherwise things get stale." At both the VNA and the symphony, new board members have helped improve websites, initiate

e-newsletters, and target on-line advertising. "Our new members are a voice that says the symphony is a wonderful institution, and to keep growing we need it to be more relevant to all ages," says the symphony's executive director, Sara Miller.

Ridgefield is vibrant and well-rounded thanks in large part to the dedicated people who donate their time and skills to dozens of organizations. The older generation has set the bar high for those who must fill their shoes. Still, the younger crowd seems up to the challenge—having already stepped forward to grasp the baton. ■

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