



# My Take on My Way

by Peggy M. Siegel

Last November, DCV Board member **Bob McDonald** invited me to share in the monthly newsletter my experiences, having participated in a seminal Dupont Circle Village initiative. Entitled *My Way*, it aimed to cap off a life well-lived (hopefully, a claim that most of us can make) with a good death by helping us to “prepare for the inevitable by making plans and choices for the end of life.” Bob encouraged me to include: 1) my motivation for participating; 2) things I learned; and 3) how it had changed my perspective.

But first, some context. Each of us, members of an organization founded on the goal of successfully aging in place, can certainly relate. Fortunately, four Villagers—**Jeanne Downing, Monica Heppel, Abigail Wiebenson,** and **Susan Doolittle** moved our collective goal from aspiration to action.

“(We) got together to learn as a squad about end of life,” explains Jeanne when asked how *My Way* came to be. Monica added personal details. “I think the 4 of us came together with different priorities and at different points in thinking about end of life issues. I started at the end point, thinking of a throw away comment ‘just shoot me’ I had made with reference to a friend who had been on life support for a while. A more serious consideration led to the questions of what can one do when the quantity of days your body wants to continue exceeds the quality of life your consider worth living?”

“The questions just kept getting bigger,” she continued. What is a good death for me and how can I make my death good for those I care about? What do I need to do to improve the odds of achieving these? Big questions call for a larger discussion with people who share certain values regarding life and death.”

The four friends met regularly for over a year. They drilled down on articulating priorities, divided the task of collecting information and identifying key resources, and then discussed their findings regarding, as Monica explained, “the pragmatics of getting ready for a good death.”

And here is where the DCV enters the picture. It became the vehicle through which the four pathfinders could share what they had learned. A grant proposal, written by DCV Executive Director **Eva M. Lucero** and Health & Wellness Committee member **Leslie Sawin**, secured a

grant to produce materials and meet over six sessions beginning in March and ending in October. Twenty Villagers, including me, signed up to participate.

Each session followed a similar format. Materials were emailed in advance in order to frame the topic. One or two of the four pathfinders served as facilitators. The presentations often included a guest speaker as well as publications/handouts, followed by table discussions of the key issues and brief evaluations.

Space considerations preclude offering details of each session. Fortunately, DCV provided participants with a bounty of written materials, resources, and additional contacts. Leslie captured session highlights in previous editions of the *Dupont Circle Village News*. *My Way* also has its own tab under the Health & Wellness section of the DCV website, which provides information on each of the six sessions—as well as the capacity to add new information so that members can benefit in perpetuity. DCV executive staff often attended the *My Way* sessions and are providing critical support to Villagers who are addressing the issues. The Live & Learn and Health & Wellness Committees are expanding on the topics as well. An upcoming event, “Achieving a Good Death: A Practical Guide to the End of Life Conversation with **Chris Palmer**,” is scheduled for January 14th.

**1. My motivation for participating.** In March, *My Way* had sent participants a preliminary survey asking what had drawn us to the program, our goals for working together, and to identify any particular issues that were important to us. In part, I responded that my goal was to live independently as long as possible, “reducing uncertainty” by coming up with a plan NOW—particularly given my situation of living solo with no close family in DC. The opportunity to be guided by “a small group of trusted friends who have explored such issues in-depth and are willing to share what they had learned” was especially appealing.

**2. Things I learned.** Probably, the greatest thing I learned was that achieving a good death is even more complicated and complex than I had thought. The challenge, then, is not to be overwhelmed into a state of passivity or denial by the enormity of the task. Fortunately, *My Way* has provided an indispensable starting point to forge ahead.

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My plan is to delve into all of the materials and produce a huge check list of things done, things to do, additional issues, a way to connect the dots, and a timeline. Overwhelming, perhaps, but manageable by putting one proverbial foot in front of the other. The good news: Strength in numbers. There's an incredible support base of individuals who are confronting similar circumstances with an entire Village available to support them.

The My Way approach also offers a useful format for the Village to address future priority issues in a similar fashion, where a small group of like-minded members act as catalysts and facilitators for future organizational action.

**3. How My Way changed my perspective** For me, the best response is to revisit the original source. Imagine the immortal image of Frank Sinatra belting out one of his signature tunes, which begins like this:

***And now the end is near  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend, I'll make it clear  
I'll state my case, of which I am certain***

***I've lived a life that's full  
I've traveled each and every highway  
And more, much more  
I did it, I did it my way...***

Just a tune no longer. Because of My Way—the DCV version—the lyrics resonate differently, profoundly. They represent the path forward.