

Maintaining Seniors Independence

Last month we began a series on the SMART Fund, which supports innovative, community-based initiatives that promote and improve the health of VCH residents. In this issue, we profile two SMART Fund seniors' projects.

The SMART Fund finances 12 health promotion projects that focus on improving seniors' wellness by:

- Reaching out to frail and isolated seniors.
- Increasing seniors' ability to live independently within their communities.
- Engaging seniors in developing peer strategies for helping each other.

More than 200 seniors participate in one of these projects, the Seniors Healthy Community Project at Kiwassa Neighbourhood House in East Vancouver, which has received international recognition. Two years ago, the program won a \$50,000 US GlaxoSmithKline SHARE Leadership Award for fostering healthy aging across cultures, from the University of Pennsylvania Institute on Aging. And the program has just received another GlaxoSmithKline award for \$75,000 US to expand services in Spanish, add more volunteers and develop a resource centre. The neighbourhood house provides a culturally sensitive, welcoming environment for fitness classes, nutritional lunches, health and wellness projects and information workshops.

"The greatest benefit is that this project improves health and wellness and increases social connections among seniors," says Nancy McRitchie, Community Programs Manager at Kiwassa.

Participants rave about the project. One elderly participant says, "Walking to Kiwassa three times a week has kept me out of a wheel chair." A family member of a 90-year-old senior adds, "If my mother didn't have



Volunteers at Kiwassa Neighbourhood House Seniors Healthy Community Project

Kiwassa, she would have been in a nursing home long ago."

The West End Seniors Network in Vancouver runs Life Unlimited, another SMART Fund project. Life Unlimited trains volunteers to give practical support to seniors with age-related disabilities, so they can live independently in their community as long as possible. Coordinator Charlene McAllister says, "Seniors want to do as much as possible, but they often need a hand. For example, walking companions accompany seniors who are visually impaired or have balance or mobility problems. Life Unlimited shows the immense

difference a little help can make in maintaining seniors' wellness and independence. Health is about making seniors feel like valued members of our society." Mildred, an 85-year-old Life Unlimited volunteer, acts as the public relations leader for the project. Although she lives with a physical disability, Mildred is often seen riding around the neighbourhood with posters advertising the project. She has a volunteer family who assists her to live independently, and in turn, she has become grandmother to this family's 12-year-old daughter.

in brief



Vancouver Coastal Health staff, family and friends participated in Vancouver's Chinese New Year's Parade on February 2, 2003