

# Schmich shares her thoughts on aging

*Celebrated columnist touches on impact of her mother's journey during visit last week*

By Ken Knutson

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"It's not about staying young. It's about acknowledging what is truly happening to you."

That was among the insights Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago Tribune columnist Mary Schmich shared with about 250 audience members during a talk at The Community House May 1, co-sponsored by King-Bruwaert House. Among the topics she covered was what it means to age and how to redefine that latter stage of life, drawing on her own experience watching and walking with her mother in her final years.

Schmich chronicled that period in a series of columns, which had widespread resonance among readers.

"It wasn't just me writing about my mother. It was me writing about an experience that many of us have shared or will share," Schmich told listeners.

The columns were compiled in a book entitled, "Even the Terrible Things Seem Beautiful to Me Now." Those words were spoken by her mother, who Schmich noted had endured many hardships, about a year before her death.

"I thought, 'I'm going to remember that!'" she quipped, eliciting chuckles.

Schmich, 65, was asked by moderator Annie Krug, execu-



Annie Krug, executive director of The Community House, interviews the Chicago Tribune's Mary Schmich May 1 during a luncheon program with the Pulitzer Prize winning columnist. Talking about ageism, Schmich told audience to guard their actions and words concerning older members of society. "Ask yourself, 'How am I behaving in ways that are actually harmful to me and to other people?'" she said. (photo by Maggie Weiterman-Skinner courtesy of The Community House)

tive director of The Community House, about societal treatment of aging,

"I am aware in a way that I wasn't, even 10 years ago, of all the diminishing ways that we talk, write and think about aging," she replied, expressing her objection to using "elderly" to describe a person. "Give an age! Don't say, 'An elderly man was killed by a car ...' How old was he?"

She cited the quote by author and activist Ashton Applewhite that "ageism is the last socially sanctioned prejudice." In a fol-

low-up email, Schmich amplified her remarks.

"We need to examine our internalized bias against aging — against our own aging and the aging of others. Are we always trying to 'correct' or hide our age or our aging process?" Schmich posed. "Look at the way we talk. Do we talk dismissively of 'old people,' even if we'd resent being talked about that way?"

Trying to measure one's value by the standards of bygone youth is "madness," she opined.

"That's not to say we shouldn't try to stay healthy and fit — of course we should — but, in general, a 65-year-old body ain't gonna be a 25-year-old body. Get used to it," Schmich stated. "And get used to the fact that getting old, approaching death, inevitably comes with worry and fear," she said.

Although she doesn't journal often, Schmich believes that her columns were cathartic for her by processing her mother's "waning through storytelling." Those caring for or mourning

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a parent should seek a healthy outlet for their emotions, she counseled, as should those struggling with aging's effects.

"I think finding some form of creative expression can be very helpful in processing the loss of a parent, or your own aging, whether it's writing, drawing, playing an instrument. I did all of those a lot while my mother was dying and after her death. They were a great release and a form of contemplation. Moving is good too. Walk. Do yoga. Breathe. Go be with the trees. Those are the best physical and mental antidotes to anxiety over aging I know," she said.

Aging is a journey no one will avoid, and the best way to approach it is with acceptance and appreciation for each step's joys and lessons.

"I think the key is to find the balance between acknowledging what is — age happens, death comes — and finding the ways — creative expression, caring relationships, moving as much as your body allows — that let our hearts stay open to the world and to ourselves," Schmich submitted. "Age isn't just an attitude. But an open attitude helps."

## New aging website connects users, resources

By Pamela Lannom

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"To be alive is to be aging."

That's one of the messages of a new website devoted to helping connect those who are aging and their loved ones with information and resources.

The website, redefiningaging.org, was established through the leadership of Community Memorial Foundation in partnership with The Hinsdalean and members of the Healthy Aging Task Force. It was announced last week at two events: a May 1 lunch at The Community House featuring Mary Schmich (see story above) and Aging Care Connections' luncheon at La Grange Country Club the same day to kick off Aging Well Month.

"I think we had two successful events launching this initiative," said

Annie Krug, executive director of The Community House, who was instrumental in creating the site.

She is most impressed by the quantity of information it contains.

"We knew sitting around that table that there is a lot going on in our community, and even the service providers who are pretty dialed in to each other don't understand the breadth and scope of it," she said.

The site's approach treats aging as a natural part of being alive, rather than a topic to be avoided.

"There was an element of needing to be candid and authentic and real about this, and to quit tip-toeing around some stuff," said Krug, who wrote the copy.

Greg DiDomenico, president and chief executive officer of Community Memorial Foundation, said providing a grant for the site's development fit well

with the foundation's mission.

"We're always looking for ways to be able to increase awareness of local resources and assets, and by doing that in partnership with the Healthy Aging Task Force — and of course The Hinsdalean and The Community House — it certainly helps us deepen the impact of our investment," he said.

The site organizes information based on the user. An individual seeking information for him or herself can click on "My Journey." Those assisting a loved one can access resources by clicking on "A Partner on the Journey." Links provide information about housing services, health care and wellness, legal services, mental health and counseling services, and more. The site also will include all of the stories published as part of The Hinsdalean's Redefining Aging series.

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"There's a lot of great information about local resources and tools and assets in our community," DiDomenico said. "It's a great addition."

Content for the site's pilot year of will be provided by members of the Healthy Aging Task Force, which are listed on the site. Use of the site will be monitored for 12 months — the period covered by the grant — before a decision is made about its future.

"We're really proud of it," Krug said. "We are really, really pleased with what we believe is an effective tool that showcases our extraordinary resources in the community."