

Roslindale Neighbors: Lifelong Roslindale resident receives award for dedication to elder advocacy

By Lauren Bennett

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When Joanne Prince realized that the attitude around aging in America was generally negative, she knew something had to be done.

The 87-year-old Roslindale native has dedicated much of her time to fighting for the safety and well being of elders, and has been selected to receive the National LeadingAge Words to the Wise Award. LeadingAge is a premier national advocacy organization that supports elders in housing and healthcare.

Now a retired licensed practical nurse, Prince had worked in a longterm care facility, where she realized that so many of the elders could have aged at home. She said that many of the residents told her that they never thought they would live as long as they had.

“This has to change,” Prince thought. As part of the so-called “silent generation” who grew up during the Depression, Prince said “I think we’re a very strong generation because we had to face many, many things that were challenging.”

Back in the 1980s, Prince joined the Older Women’s League, which primarily focused on women and aging. They looked at the issues of elders caring for their children and their grandchildren, and she realized that there were so many elders who were “strong, doing good things, and making a change in their neighborhoods and homes.” She decided that she wanted to be a part of that change.

While working at the longterm care facility, Prince said that they were beginning to care for elders from so many different ethnic groups, and she decided that something needed to be done to help everyone understand that aging is not a disease, but rather a process.

She met several others who wanted to help, and in 1994, they created the Multi Cultural Coalition on Aging, which was held at Roxbury Community College. This coalition consisted of workshops in several different languages to help elders from different racial and ethnic groups better understand the aging process, as well as provide them with resources.

Today, Prince said that work is continuing in clinics and hospitals and she makes sure that people are receiving culturally competent care and that generations are aging together “successfully in mind, body, and spirit.”

“It’s just been a passion of mine to know that we are aging and some of us are aging quite well,” Prince said. “I have several chronic conditions but I don’t let that stop me.”

She said it is a good thing that the City of Boston is home to so many people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. “We can learn from each other and respect one another,” Prince said.

Prince said she doesn’t lead as many workshops as she used to, but she does still try and convince her peers to be more active in the community and realize that there are some very positive things about aging. “Some of us have been through very difficult times and have survived those times,” she said. She added that elders have learned great lessons over the years and should recognize that.

She also hopes that traditional Sunday family dinners can be kept alive in some form. She hopes that families will get together if grandparents live nearby to celebrate their aging and hear their stories. “They have wonderful stories to share,” she said.

“Research has shown that in America, 10,000 people are turning 65 every day,” said Prince. She said that number is going to continue to grow, and the first wave of the boomer generation are now in their 70s. “It’s so important for my generation to adopt a boomer and let them see that aging can be a wonderful time in your life,” she said.

There is a need for change for the “anti-aging” way of thinking that is happening in America right now, Price said. “There is life after 65, or 70, or 80 even,” she added.

“I hope that in a way I have been a role model about aging,” Prince said. “As long as you have some physical health and some mental health there is some work to do. I would encourage boomers to thing about their passions.”

As a member of the Boston Commission on Elder Affairs Advisory Council, Prince said that “there’s a lot of work to be done,” and encourages more people to attend the meetings.

She said this country really has to think about aging and be more prepared for it. There are elder friendly cities and neighborhoods now, she said, where older people can thrive in a space that is designed for them. For example, sidewalks are created for ease of use with walkers and wheelchairs.

Prince said she would like to remind younger generations that “aging is not a disease; it’s a process. We all age very differently. Some of us age quite well and some of us have little stumbling blocks along the way.”

Prince also believes that elders need to be more responsible for planning their own aging. They should ask questions of whether or not they want to age in their own home or move to an assisted living facility, should finances allow.

She also said that it is very important for families to have the discussion about end of life, even if it is not one they want to have. "I think it is very important for families to have that discussion while they're well." She said both of her daughters and her doctor know her wishes and what kind of care she wants to receive as she continues to age.

Prince will be traveling to Philadelphia to receive the National LeadingAge Words to the Wise Award on Oct. 29, where she will also be a featured speaker.

Her final piece of advice: "Take advantage of all the programs out there. Stay well and stay healthy and live to your full potential."