

Pitkin County Aging Well Community Initiative
June 24, 2014
Tony Vagneur, Guest Speaker

Howdy and Good Afternoon to all of you! I don't know what you think about it, but I'm happy to see you! There are a few familiar faces in the audience, like a lot and that's a really good thing.

It's interesting, I think, to realize those of us over 50 are the fastest growing demographic in our community. Think about this – stick your head in the Sundeck on any given day and it's a good bet you won't see anyone under 60 years old sitting there. The Skico makes a big deal out of the XGames, the local press is always going on about the “young up-and-comers.” We may not be young, but we're sure as hell the new “up and comers.” Less than half of Pitkin County's population is unaware of this, but there's something about aging that gives depth to our perception and clarity to our souls. But don't tell anyone – let those young 'uns earn that knowledge!

I'm talking about choices today, I think, and hope to underscore that concept with a few stories as I talk along. Now, by virtue of our presence here, it might be because we know a senior citizen, or that we are supportive of senior citizens, or remember when our parents were senior citizens, but I'm guessing that not everyone who is a senior is willing to admit it. It's kind of like a 13-step program – it's not going to work unless we first admit we're actually senior citizens, or soon will be.

Today, this great group of people from Pitkin County has laid out a smorgasbord of initiatives designed to make aging in this area as seamless as possible. We need to become proactive about them, solely for the benefit of our future. Now, keep this one thought in mind as I relate some stories about aging – we don't get to choose when we will need to take advantage of these initiatives, so we need to prepare for that eventuality now! Let's get behind this great “Aging Well” program so that it is there for everyone, including ourselves.

A few years ago, a lady from the Pitkin County senior center called me on the phone and asked if I'd be interested in playing the accordion for the group. I explained that although I used to play the accordion, I had quit some years before and wasn't interested in dragging it out for any occasion. However, I suggested that perhaps I could bring my piano up and play a small piano concert for them. She paused, seemingly thinking about it, and then said, “Well, that wouldn't do us much good, now would it?” I don't think they wanted me as much as they really missed Hildur Anderson.

It used to be that the only thing that told me I was getting older was the mirror, and I strongly suspected it was the quality of the mirror, but lately and only every now and then, someone throws out a comment that reminds me that maybe I am getting a tad older. The other day, I went to my son-in-law's place to pick up a Black Angus bull and

he says, "As long as you're here, help us load a steer up in my trailer." And as we approached the area where the steer was held, he says to one of his hired hands, "Better let Tony stand there and hold the trailer gate, we might have to do some running to get that steer out of the corral." I looked at the hired hand and said, "You run the damned gate. I'll run after the steer." Nobody said a word and I did the running. Comments like that imply that we might be getting up there, and I suppose we should accept the good intentions - it's not people being mean - they're just looking out for us - but no one says we have to like it.

But getting older, work and retirement are all about perception, if you ask me. When I was a young boy, I spent most of every day hanging out with my grandfather, riding horses and checking on the cattle, or rounding up the wild horses on Vagneur Mountain, or myriad other things that ranchers do. No one told me directly but I overheard enough conversations to know that Gramps was getting ready to retire. At 8 or 9 years old, the concept of retirement didn't mean much to me, and my overriding thought was that somehow it meant I would lose my grandfather.

Gramps retired that winter, but nothing changed. He was still out on the feed sled every day and come summer, nothing changed. We still rode our horses almost every day, he irrigated first thing every morning, still ran a large herd of cattle and spent weekends in town with his girlfriend, Jenny. A conversation of adults in a car that summer, waiting for someone to come out of the Red Onion, clued me into Social Security, and that's what retirement has meant to me ever since - you don't stop working, the government just starts sending you a check.

And some of my choices: Last winter, I skied 112 days, and I don't ski groomers, either; hiked a brute of a hill two days a week with my friend, Margaret, and managed a solo trip up the Highland Bowl on a great powder day. In the summer, I do hard, physical work, ride my horse at least six days a week, take care of 200 hundred head of cattle up in the high country. Throw in some road trips, a little time on the keyboard writing my column, a book I'm working on, and I don't think I've slowed down a bit. And that might have something to do with why I get a little testy about being called "old" or "retired."

This next story exemplifies, at least to me, the reason we need to make the right choices while we can, instead of waiting until it's too late. Even though it's a little harsh. It was a bluebird, March day, several years ago, and I don't know when for certain, but I was 63 or 64, and my buddy Bob Snyder and I had put in a great ski day. We were at the top of Silver Queen, and I took off first, remarking that I was just gonna take it easy the rest of the way down. I went over to the skier's right, simply because I hadn't skied that line all winter and was really enjoying it when one of those sideways moguls, those unnatural things that go 90 degrees to the fall line, popped up in front of me and I thought, "Oh hell, this is going to take some finesse to survive." But I didn't and as my skis shot up in the air over my head in the beginning of an aerial back flip, I consciously relaxed and waited for the wreck to play itself out. I remember landing hard on my

helmet and the loud “Crack” as it hit the snow made me silently grateful that I was glad I was wearing a helmet.

A few more contortions and then it was over. I was lying in a heap, face down in the snow, my left arm in a weird position, and unable to breathe due to the snow in my face. And, I couldn't move. I was totally paralyzed – the only thing I could move was my chin and I was frantically rotating it around and around, trying to build an air hole. My buddy Bob skied up, after what seemed like an eternity (but was actually only a few seconds) and scooped the snow away from around my face. I think he saved my life right then.

And in an instant, much quicker than the time it has taken to tell this story, I was forced to make some cold calculations about my predicament, but first I had to get some air. I quit the regular workaday world a long time ago and after taking a kidding for many years about “why don't you get a job,” I realized all those things I was going to do when I could no longer ski or ride my horses, would now be impossible. No more piano playing, no writing a book, at least not on the keyboard, no getting a job. It looked dismal.

The surgeon who did my neck said that another millimeter on my spinal cord would like have ended it all for me, but I got lucky, very lucky, as you can see.

But, lying there in the snow, I thought a lot about choices, and that's why I feel very strongly that forces other than ourselves will decide when we need to avail ourselves of the initiatives discussed today. Making a choice today to get behind this incredibly great program will guarantee that we have help and assistance when we need it, whether it's our choice, or not.