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Stepping out with the Young at Heart

What started as a small initiative, 4-get-me-not has come a long way in beating loneliness and other health issues among the elderly. **Tessy Koshy** meets some members while at an outing to a cat cafe

A pair of green feline eyes stare curiously at the deeply lined beaming face of Geraldine Cox. Within seconds the kitty's soft paws make a swift move as she clambers into the warm lap of the 60 plus senior, seated comfortably on a floor cushion at Ailuromania Cat Cafe in Jumeirah, Dubai. Together they cut a pretty picture, utterly content in each other's company as Geraldine's wrinkled, pudgy

fingers gently caress the cat's smooth belly. "I am so excited to be here. I have been really looking forward to this visit," shares the Dubai resident, who is single and works part time as a teacher.

Soon, a few other furry paws, with raised tails crowd around the duo. Watching this tender scene unfold Geraldine's friends and fellow seniors – Valerian Mendonca and Elsie D'Mello join in the cat party on the couch. Members of 4-get-me-not, a local support group for Alzheimer patients and senior residents in the UAE, they are all at the cat cafe today for one of their interactive outings conducted with social distancing measures during Covid. With over 300 members in the UAE,

70 of them in Dubai alone, 4-get-me-not offers opportunities for seniors to remain active and to reach out to others. Since December 2020, Desiree Vlekken, the founder of 4-get-me-not has brought in several such small groups of seniors to the cat cafe.

Getting older, let's face it, can be lonely. Retired and mostly at home, often still grieving the loss of their life partners, while struggling with health worries – life for an elderly person can be quite overwhelming. Add to that the stress of increased isolation during Covid.

From March 2020 to January 2021, for over 10 months 85-year-old Valerian, a retired school teacher from India, did

not step out of his house in Oud Metha in Dubai. "All I could do was stroll along the long passage in our apartment block. I have always enjoyed meeting people but in Covid I had to restrain myself because of my age," shares the tall and bony, Indian expat, who lives with his daughter. A witty conversationalist, curious and chatty, in just two months of joining 4-get-me-not, he has bonded well with a ton of the peers. "I lost my wife suddenly in 2017. She was a very friendly and active person. Now I live with my daughter and grandkids but there is no greater joy than sharing a laugh with your friends," he says between sips of tea at the cafe.

Seated next to him is the short, bespectacled Elsie with a mop of curly grey hair. After losing her husband to cancer 18 years ago, she too resides with her daughter's family in Dubai. Pottering around her four grandchildren, cooking and walking the dog keeps her busy at home. Yet meeting friends from 4-get-me-not holds a special place in her heart. "There are many things we cannot share with our kids, which I am comfortable discussing with friends. And it's always great fun to be with people of your own age," she says with a twinkle in her eye, exchanging knowing glances with others on the table.

Being part of 4-get-me-not outings and online activities, the seniors say, ▶



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have brought immense joy and hope in their lives. A blessing especially in the uncertain times of a pandemic.

Founded in 2013, by Desiree, who is originally from the Philippines, the organisation offers a social platform for Alzheimer patients, their families and caregivers. Today, its members also include senior citizens above 60 in the UAE. “Before the pandemic we used to have one interactive activity per week but Covid posed a lot of challenge and we relied on online talks and programs, and are now slowly stepping out in small groups,” shares the enthusiastic founder.

A resident of Dubai for over two decades, Desiree was painfully aware of the daily struggles brought on by old age, that her parents and in-laws were facing in her home country. Her understanding about the debilitating effects of Dementia grew, when her father-in-law was diagnosed with both Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s few years ago. “It was because of him and my late father, who also had Parkinson’s, that I set up 4-get-me-not as a social enterprise to raise awareness about Dementia and to provide a common platform for old people,” she adds.

According to Alzheimer’s Disease International (ADI) there are currently over 50 million people worldwide living with Dementia, a new case arising every three seconds. Keeping active, eating well and engaging in social activities all promote good brain health and may reduce the risk of developing Dementia. It is also well established that social connectedness, joining a club or a community group reduces the risk of Dementia.

“Meeting fellow seniors and interacting with others boosts their feelings of well-being and decreases sadness. They also show an increase in appetite as their moods become better. Studies have shown



that when seniors feel good, it increases the production and release of serotonin in the body, thereby improving their cognitive performance. For instance, it is not hard to miss at the cat café how these animals can provide emotional stability particularly during stressful times as pets don’t expect anything from you except your love,” she says.

Over the last few months, the seniors, have been part of online art classes, have started a book club, gone for salon sessions and are also learning chess on Tuesdays at the Sharjah Chess and Cultural Club. In search of elderly friendly cafes, they have even started a vlog called Vintage Vloggers-- reviewing restaurants in the emirates on accessibility, healthy menu and seating comforts.

While being part of these trips and activities the seniors share that they have discovered latent talents and rekindled

childhood interests. When a dear friend and fellow member of our group was relocating from Dubai, we wanted to pay tribute to her. While collaborating with other members, I discovered that I could write lyrics, compose and sing in tune,” reveals Geraldine, still finding succour in the company of a cloader of cats. Several of them are relearning chess, a game they had played as children. Playing bingo and staging community plays have expanded their social lives and given them a sense of purpose.

And unlike what you thought it’s not aches and pains that the oldies talk about when they meet. “We laugh and sing, share jokes and recipes and go down memory lane while relishing every moment of the time spent together,” shares Elsie with an indulgent smile on her face.