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## Forum focuses on seniors' isolation

Links to physical illness, functional decline, cognitive loss and early death were among concerns highlighted by New York Times columnist Jane Brody

**SHELBY REYNOLDS**

SHELBY.REYNOLDS@NAPLESNEWS.COM; 239-263-4829

Jaclynn Faffer remembers the first woman who walked through the doors of the Naples Senior Center when it started serving weekly lunches three years ago.

The woman told volunteers she hadn't shared a meal with another person since her husband died two years earlier.

At a lunch just a few weeks ago, Faffer saw the same woman, she said.

"She put her arms around the people she was sitting with and she said, 'Now I have friends. I have friends here, and we're friends on the outside, and now I have lots of meals with lots of people,'" said Faffer, president and CEO of Jewish Family & Community Services of Southwest Florida, a nonprofit organization that helps individuals and families with programs such as the Naples Senior Center.

Faffer shared this story with an audience of more than 100 people Friday morning during a forum hosted by JFCS.

The woman in Faffer's story is among a growing number of Collier County residents affected by isolation and loneliness, Faffer said. She hoped the forum would help bring those concerns to light.

The community forum, "Health & Happiness After 60," included a speech by New York Times health columnist Jane

Brody and a panel featuring Faffer, Brody and geriatric psychiatrist Marc Agronin of Miami.

The need for senior care in Collier, Faffer said, is evidenced by the growing number of visitors at the Naples Senior Center, the first of its kind in the county. Three years ago, the center started with 80 members. It now has 1,200, she said.

Seniors make up a large segment of the population in Collier — 42 percent in season and 31 percent during the off-season, Faffer said during her talk.

"Over and over again, we began to hear that they were isolated, lonely and need contact," Faffer said.

Brody, author of "Jane Brody's Nutrition Book" and "Jane Brody's Good Food Book," spoke about how loneliness has been linked to an increased risk of physical illness, functional decline, cognitive loss and early death.

"My goal, my hope, is to have many, if not all of us, enjoy our golden years untarnished, as bright, fun-filled, healthy years filled with activities we enjoy and people we enjoy being with," she said to the audience.

Good nutrition, regular physical exercise and social connectedness — "the antidote to loneliness" — are tools she advised can combat poor health in old age. Feelings of loneliness, she said, can accelerate cognitive decline and raise the risk of

dementia by 64 percent, citing research from a Dutch study.

Women are much more likely to become widowed and live alone, Brody said, and the quality of relationships is more important than the quantity.

Brody, herself, has experienced it firsthand.

"Four years after my husband died, I realized how depressing it was to come home several times a day to an empty house," she said during the forum. "With my family's encouragement, I adopted a puppy and within three months I had met more new people in the neighborhood than I had in the 47 years I'd lived there. Several have become good friends."

Agronin spoke about the need for a feeling of purpose and capability among seniors. People who focus on the positive rather than the negative, he said, live on average 7.6 years longer.

"The way we look at ourselves," he said, "we almost become that way. Focus on having a positive attitude toward yourself and aging."

Faffer said she hopes the forum will put a spotlight on seniors and the issues of isolation they face.

"We're hoping to get the word out that the needs of seniors are important and we're asking everybody to step up to the plate to address this," she said.