

Stories Matter

At one of our community meetings, seniors were sharing their healthcare stories. A petite older woman led off with the moral of her story: “Don’t fall in love with your primary care doctor.” She had our immediate attention---where was this narrative going? For many years she had seen the same primary care doctor. She liked him and felt she received good care. Then she had a nagging pain in her chest that wouldn’t go away. She visited him, and after a very brief exam that didn’t find anything, he advised her to just take some Advil. She did so, the pain remained. She returned to him a second time, and when his second exam also found nothing specific, he prescribed a stronger prescription pain remedy. She tried that, but her pain continued to worsen. Although she was concerned that it might affect her relationship with her doctor, she needed to find another one. She did so. Her new doctor did a more thorough exam, including some tests, and immediately sent her to a cancer specialist. The specialist confirmed cancer, and with treatment saved her life.

Another story we heard about primary care: a senior needed a new primary care doctor when hers retired. Because she had been dealing with some ongoing health issues, she felt it was very important to find a new primary doctor who was a good fit for her. She began her search by asking around to friends and acquaintances for recommendations, and came up with three names. She called the first one’s office, explained she was seeking a new doctor and asked to schedule a brief interview with the doctor. This baffled the receptionist, who claimed she had never heard such a request before. Calling the office of the second doctor on her list, after the lengthy discussion she got her request across. After checking with the doctor, the receptionist replied that the doctor could talk to her in about two months. Finally she obtained an interview with the third doctor on her list. The doctor was a good listener, seemed to understand how to treat of her medical challenges, and has turned out to be a very good fit.

Groups and persons working for social change toss around the word “empowerment” a lot. We have found that one of the best ways for us to become empowered is by hearing stories of people who empowered themselves, to speak up and act up. The most recent example is the stories women in the Me Too movement have had the courage to share. Their stories have sparked an ongoing nationwide, indeed international demand for institutional change. In our work we are always motivated by sharing stories of people who acted instead of being passive when dealing with people or institutions that appeared to have more power. We know there are many “senior stories” about empowerment, and we look forward to hearing them at our community meetings.