

Facing Adversity with Courage and Hope!

What happens when the very systems that are in place to help are broken? For someone like Senaida, falling through the cracks becomes a way of life.

THE JOURNEY

Senaida was born in Fort Collins in 1946. At the age of eight, she and her five siblings were taken from their mother and sent in different directions. For Senaida, the burden of growing up long before her time began at a state home and training center in Grand Junction.

Even though she attended school during her time there, she was also responsible for ten other children, most of whom were babies. Food was provided, but Senaida shouldered the burden of caring for these children, including changing diapers, feeding, bathing and bedtime rituals. She took great care in her duties, assuming an adult role in their lives. But the child within Senaida still found small ways to exist through friendship with a young girl named Alice, who gave her candy through the fence when they were outside. They were the same age and soon became best friends, until one day, Alice didn't come to the fence anymore.

"I was responsible for ten kids and cared for them like they were my own."

At age 13, Senaida was sent to another home and training school in Fort Logan. Here she met a 17 year old girl who befriended her and together they made plans to escape. The first time Senaida tried to run away, she was caught. Her punishment included having to wear a bag over her head every day for a week. Their second attempt was successful, but freedom meant supporting herself and she soon became a stripper to make money. Just as she took immense pride in caring for those ten children, Senaida is quick to share that she was "the best pole dancer" she could be.

PERSERVERANCE

As time went on, Senaida found comfort in additional employment at a nursing home, where she cooked, cleaned, and enjoyed spending her breaks visiting with the older adults who lived there. She also took on countless other jobs, including cleaning houses and working in factories. At age 17, she met and fell in love with a man who soon became her husband. Even though there was a five-year age difference, for the first time in her life she felt loved and supported as their relationship provided space for healing. Senaida also found healing in independence. Even though she was married, she had saved enough money to purchase a home entirely on her own at the young age of 24.

When Senaida was 57 her husband passed away and the loss was devastating for her. She shares, "I gave up on life and seldom ate." Her health deteriorated over the next ten years until she ran into an old childhood friend – the one who gave her candy through the fence all those years ago. Alice

convinced her to seek medical attention which resulted in a lengthy hospital stay. With Alice's support, Senaida began yet another journey of healing and slowly started participating in life again. And then in 2009 she was in a devastating car accident, experiencing a traumatic brain injury that left her with cognitive impairment and ongoing headaches.

Senaida eventually reconnected with her siblings, however all but one had health issues and passed away at early ages. After the only surviving brother lost his wife, he moved in with her to assist in her care and with the help of friends, she once again survived and began another healing journey from trauma. It was then that Alice introduced her to Southwest Improvement Council (SWIC), and she began attending weekday activities and lunch as often as her health would allow.

"Everyone is treated with respect."

Now age 77, Senaida shares that upon coming to SWIC, she felt safe and accepted immediately because the organization's team treated everyone with care and respect. Additionally, she met peers who were friendly and welcoming and with whom she engaged in activities before sharing a nutritious free hot lunch. Senaida loves to bring and share snacks with her friends and the SWIC team as a way of giving back and engaging in a competitive game of bingo is probably her favorite activity. Even though her frequent headaches and cognitive damage make her life difficult sometimes, she still actively engages and participates in as much as possible.

SWIC serves 300 unduplicated individuals and provides 7,000 touchpoints or opportunities annually for older adults to engage in social interactions.

FINDING HOPE

"This place has changed my life."

When asked how she is doing, Senaida is quick to share, "I'm doing good – so much better than I was. I realize now that I have to take care of me. Before I felt like I was nothing! But, when I started coming here, I realized that I am special!" When asked what it is about SWIC that has had such a profound impact, she added, "Everyone here makes me feel so special. I now know that the past is in the past and I have so much to look forward to. I love coming here! Everyone here is my friend, and I know that I matter. This place has changed my life!"

Southwest Improvement Council understands the transformative power of social connections, which plays a vital role in enriching life for older adults. Engaging in social activities stimulates cognitive function, promotes mental acuity, contributes to better physical health and emotional well-being and also helps combat feelings of loneliness and depression. SWIC's Dedicated programs and activities are designed to foster meaningful interactions, provide opportunities for personal growth and create a vibrant community for older adults, age 60 and over. New friendships are forged, while old ones are rekindled. And sometimes, individuals reconnect with long-lost family members or friends. SWIC's

Dining and Activity Center provides a safe and welcoming environment, where all cultures are celebrated and everyone matters.