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'Being Mortal' author focuses on what's important toward the end of life

By Pippa Fisher



Dr. Atul Gawande, bestselling author of "Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End"
Photo provided

With today's fastest growing segment of the population being 85 years old and up, there has never been a better time for planning how and on what terms one wants to live a full life through the "golden years."

There are few people in the country better able to steer a conversation in that direction than bestselling author and surgeon Atul Gawande. Lamorinda residents will have an opportunity to attend a telecast by Gawande Sept. 25 in Lafayette.

The live-streamed event featuring an interview with Gawande, author of "Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End," is being put on by Beacon Hill Village in celebration of 15 years of the "village movement." Gawande wrote his book to open a discussion about how people might "live successfully all the way to their very end."

Boston's Beacon Hill Village started the movement in 1999. The founders wanted to stay engaged in their own neighborhood but recognized they would need support as they aged. A Village comprises a group of residents who form a nonprofit to provide connections and services to support the elderly aging in their own homes, as opposed to being moved to senior care facilities. There are now close to 250 villages in the country.

Lamorinda Village Executive Director Anne Ornelas says that Lamorinda Village has not done anything like this event before. "The telecast is something special and may not happen again anytime soon with Dr. Gawande. We are thrilled to have been invited by our sister village in Boston to join in on this event."

Following the telecast there will be small group discussions facilitated by Walnut Creek Eldercare Services Founder Linda Fodrini-Johnson.

"We think this is a truly special opportunity for all Villages who are taking part. Dr. Gawande will be talking about the concept of community and why it's so important particularly for those in their 70s and beyond," says Ornelas.

"The Village movement is an important part of the aging journey, particularly for those who are alone or have few social connections to help them with things. I hope this event brings more awareness of the resources available to older adults in Contra Costa. Villages are part of a network of resources that can help you stay independent and aging in your home or community."

When asked specifically about the book "On Being Mortal" Ornelas says, "I've read the book. I've given it to my mom to read as well. Many of our members have read it. Personally, I think that illness, death and dying are topics that make people uncomfortable and we need to get over that as a society. Dr. Gawande brings a humanistic approach to how people can plan to live until they die. It's as simple as deciding that if you become ill, what are the things that are important to you during the treatment, or when to end treatment. Or if you can't do the things you used to be able to do or enjoy, finding new things that can replace them."

Ornelas says her mother has made some decisions that have changed how the rest of her life will be handled and says, "It's great, because we as a family now know what's most important to her in a different way than what we expected."

The event takes place from 2 to 4 p.m. Monday, Sept. 25 at the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, 49 Knox Drive in Lafayette. Residents should register for the free event online at www.lamorindavillage.org, as seating is limited.

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