

2026 CONNECTIONS

The Behind-the-Scenes Issue

FALL

Remembering Dr. Richard “Dick” Blank A Legacy of Caring 1938 - 2026

Dear Friends,

I want to tell you a story about Dick Blank.

The year was 1961, and a handsome young man wearing dark glasses and carrying a lunch tray walked into the cafeteria of his medical school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Spotting some friends, he headed toward their table and discovered a beautiful young woman sitting with them.

Patricia quickly rebuffed his flirtations, but Dick wasn't discouraged. With persistence, humor, and more than a little determination, he eventually won her attention and, before long, her heart.

Dick and Pat built a partnership grounded in friendship, respect, and love. They raised their family, built a medical practice, paddled their canoe across Minnesota lakes, and cared for the people they loved through every season of life.

Their greatest challenge came when Pat was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. They knew it was a battle they could not win, but they were determined to make the journey as meaningful and loving as possible.

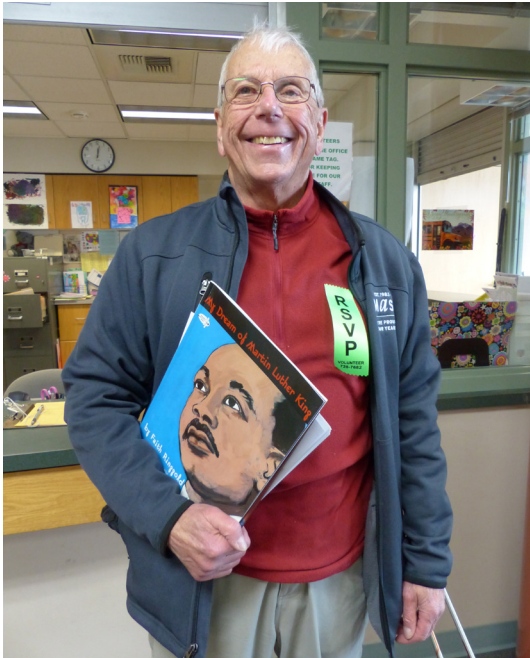
And this is where their story became part of ours.

Dick began volunteering at Missoula Aging Services in 2006. After Pat's death in 2013, he continued his work at MAS, bringing with him the perspective of someone who had lived the realities of caregiving firsthand. His experience deepened his belief that every person deserves to live, age, and die with dignity and grace. We were the lucky recipients of that belief.

For years, Dick arrived at MAS early and ready for the day. He would settle into his well-loved chair, review his plans, and get to work. And what work it was.

Dick called and checked in with Meals on Wheels clients, often developing relationships that went far

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Sustaining Independence, Investing in Each Other



It's easy to equate independence with self-reliance and "flying solo." In reality, **we support independence in each other** through the ways we share our knowledge, generosity, time, and talents.

This issue of *Connections* pulls the curtain back to give a glimpse of the network of people behind the services our community relies on. A volunteer sits down with someone to untangle a technology problem.

Medicare experts make complicated choices easier to understand. Coaches share strategies for staying active while staying safe. Behind each visible service is the learning, planning, and preparation that makes it possible.

Sometimes caring for others is the work of a lifetime. **Dr. Richard "Dick" Blank, who we remember in this issue, spent more than half a century in service to others**—as a physician, husband, father, caregiver, volunteer, advocate, and friend. For Dick, a life well lived meant caring for others. His legacy reminds us that **what we give makes up much of the substance of life.**

Taken together, these stories offer something like an instruction manual for sustaining independence: build a community rich in knowledge, choices, relationships, and practical support, and each of us has more freedom to direct our own lives.

Whether we offer professional expertise, volunteer an afternoon, share what we know, or find another way to show up for a neighbor, **each contribution adds to a shared foundation.** This is how we build a community where we can all age with greater confidence, connection, and choice.

Lisa Sheppard

Chief Executive Officer

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beyond a simple phone call. People trusted him. They told him about their worries and the things that were becoming harder. Dick listened and helped connect them with the resources they needed.

He carried their voices into every conversation where decisions were being made. He would not let us forget the people behind the policies and programs: the person who could no longer drive, the person with limited mobility, the person struggling to navigate a world that increasingly exists online, the person experiencing cognitive decline and isolation. Dick had an unwavering conviction that accessibility was not an abstract idea. It was a measure of whether we were actually reaching the people we were there to serve.

Perhaps his most profound gift, though, was his willingness to talk openly about the end of life. Dick believed people should have the opportunity to decide how they wanted their final days to unfold. He had seen the pain that comes when wishes are unclear and families are left to make agonizing decisions while grieving. Dick made sure there was no question about what he wanted. When the time came, we had the privilege of standing alongside his family. I was struck by what his clarity made possible. His family didn't have to spend those precious final moments wondering what Dick would have wanted. They could simply be together. They could love him, appreciate him, share memories, and say goodbye.

There is something deeply beautiful about that.

Dick spent so much of his life helping other people find their way through difficult moments. In the end, he gave his family that same gift: the freedom to focus on what mattered most.

That is how I will remember Dick. Not simply as a physician, or volunteer but as the man with the ready smile and dry wit, whose running jokes about being fired from his volunteer job became as familiar and comforting as any good dad joke. I will remember his love of the Packers, his dislike of e-bikes and people who pass by without saying hello, and, most of all, his willingness to ask the uncomfortable question, his insistence that we listen to those too easily overlooked, and his unwavering belief that every person deserves dignity.

And I will remember that determined young medical student who carried a lunch tray into a cafeteria, saw a beautiful young woman, and decided not to give up. We are so grateful that he didn't.

I am even more grateful that, many decades later, Dick walked through the doors of MAS and decided to stay. We are honored to carry his work forward.



Ria Overholt
Community Services
Director



Certified volunteer Joann Pittman and MAS Resource Center Manager Chris Hightower.

Resource Staff Make Sense of Medicare

Unbiased Help Gives Missoulians Confidence to Choose

During his high school years, Chris Hightower served dinners to residents at Missoula's Clark Fork Manor. The conversations he enjoyed during that early job stuck with him and influenced the course of his life.

"I really enjoyed just being around the residents there, chatting with them, hearing their stories," Hightower explains. "So I kind of knew from that moment."

A lifelong Missoulian, Hightower enjoys going to the movies at the Roxy and getting outside with his wife to hike, backpack, camp and kayak. Professionally, that early experience led him to study social work and gerontology at the University of Montana and then to Missoula Aging Services, where he now manages the Resource Center. Working with older neighbors in this role also meant learning the intricacies of Medicare.

"I never could imagine that was going to entail becoming a Medicare professional," he says.

MAS requires Resource Center staff who provide Medicare counseling to gain considerable expertise; new staff undertake initial training over the course of about two months through the State Health Insurance Assistance Program, or SHIP. **In addition to working through multiple levels of coursework and special topics, new Resource Specialists shadow experienced counselors during appointments.** Certified volunteers go through the same training, and all counselors recertify annually to keep up with changes to Medicare and its coverage options.

Learning and expertise are critical, as is the fact that these SHIP-trained counselors have no conflict of interest. **MAS staff and the trained volunteers who work with them don't sell Medicare Advantage**

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plans or earn commissions based on what someone chooses. Nor do they make decisions for the person sitting across from them. They explain options and individuals decide what works, during Open Enrollment and year-round.

“The unbiased part is truly the foundation,” Hightower says. “What we’re really trying to do is provide that education so folks feel confident in making their decisions.”

Joann Pittman has served as a trained volunteer during Medicare Open Enrollment for nearly four years, and she takes the responsibility seriously. “This is your decision. I am just guiding you through it,” she tells clients, sometimes more than once.

That guidance requires more than Medicare knowledge. **Pittman says the training has taught her to listen carefully and ask what matters most to each person.** Cost may be important, but other considerations can be equally important, such as keeping a trusted pharmacist, making sure a physician is in network, or anticipating a surgery in the coming year.

For Pittman, the work is a natural fit. Originally from Birmingham, Michigan, she spent more than 30 years working in health care, primarily in laboratory management and supervision. After living in Dallas and Albuquerque, she and her husband retired to the Missoula area in 2011 and now live on five acres in Florence. Pittman gardens, cross-stitches, reads “like crazy,” cooks plenty of enchiladas after her years in New Mexico. She and her husband share their home with two silky terriers, including a puppy she affectionately describes as “a terror, but he is just so perfect.”

After retirement, Pittman looked for meaningful ways to contribute. She found her way to Medicare counseling at MAS as well as volunteering in income tax assistance. Years later, she still loves the combination of research, detail, and working one-on-one with people.

“You have no idea of the relief I see,” she says. “You just see the stress just kind of flow out.”

Pittman is part of a larger team that makes that relief possible. The Resource Center serves more than 600 clients during Medicare Open Enrollment alone. Hightower calls Open Enrollment “a really big collaborative effort” among Resource Center staff, SHIP volunteers, and phone volunteers. **“We’re all a part of the same team.”**



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Mandy Peterson at the Blodgett Canyon overlook.

Steady On

Falls Prevention Builds Skills for Staying Active and Independent

For Mandy Petersen, falls prevention is about staying engaged. Petersen has spent years working in fitness, and after moving to Missoula in 2022, she happened to drive past Missoula Aging Services and spotted a sign advertising for a falls prevention facilitator.

“I thought it would be a perfect fit for me,” she recalls. Petersen has always enjoyed working with older clients. “I have some personal training clients in their 70s that I’ve been working with for almost a decade, and they’re stronger now than they were ten years ago.”

Petersen leads A Matter of Balance, an eight-week, evidence-based program. The class welcomes people with widely ranging abilities, including those who use canes, walkers, or wheelchairs. In addition to building strength, flexibility, and balance, participants explore topics such as reducing hazards at home, communicating with health care providers, and safely getting up after a fall.

Petersen says people are sometimes surprised by how much of the class is about mindset: “I like to talk about how aging is a privilege. We *get* to get older, we *get* to have more experience in our life.”

That might mean adapting when a favorite activity is no longer a good fit, and finding new ways to stay active and engaged. Falls are not something only “frail” people need to think about. Active, fit participants can benefit from the class, too.

Volunteer co-coach Peggy Siedel has seen this firsthand. A runner who completed a half marathon this summer, Siedel came to MAS while caring for her husband and later began volunteering with Petersen’s classes.

“She is the heart of this program,” Siedel says of Petersen, “kind and caring and compassionate.”

Siedel is one of four regular volunteers who facilitate classes. She has watched participants arrive nervous and gradually become more comfortable, with the exercises and information, and with each other.

Petersen leads A Matter of Balance, an eight-week, evidence-based program. The class welcomes people



Peggy Siedel (left) during a weekend visit with a friend from Washington.

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Ombudsmen Empower Choice at the Table

Reflecting on the changing seasons and upcoming holidays, I'm struck by the importance of traditions and culture surrounding meals and food. For people living in Missoula's long-term care communities, food also plays a central role in health and well-being. MAS's Ombudsman Program offers assistance to ensure residents and their families understand their rights when it comes to nutrition, dietary requirements, and preferences.

This year, the National Resident Rights Month theme, "Join Us at the Table," invites us to empower resident self-determination and choice when it comes to food and nutrition.

Residents are often surprised to hear that, like human rights and civil rights, resident rights are guaranteed by state and federal law. People who work in long-term care communities are bound by law to listen to residents and respect and honor their choices.

I recently worked with a resident who was concerned about the nutritional value of the food being served and its impact on her health. We brainstormed options; however, the resident worried that staff or tablemates would label her a troublemaker.

Fear of retaliation is common among residents and as ombudsmen we must take direction from residents and avoid acting without permission. I continued to meet with this resident, providing information on dietary and resident rights regulations, and acting as a sounding board while validating her concerns. This story had a happy ending. The resident contacted her primary care provider, who submitted an order to the long-term care community indicating her special dietary requirements.

As an ombudsman, what I enjoy most is the privilege of visiting residents in their homes. There is nothing more rewarding than being recognized as someone who will listen as a trusted friend, keeping confidences, and helping residents understand their rights.



Mary Dalton
Ombudsman Supervisor

(Continued from previous page)

"Most of them bond with each other," she says. "You see them at the breaks starting to bond and talk amongst themselves."

That sense of connection is part of what Petersen values, too. Each class develops its own personality, she says, as participants exchange ideas, encourage one another, and sometimes form friendships that continue after the course ends.

MAS and the Montana Goes Falls Free Coalition offered a free falls-risk screenings this September and the next A Matter of Balance session begins in October. Missoulians can register to build skills, confidence, and community. One step at a time.

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May - August 2026

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made gifts of \$200 or more:*

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Tax-Smart Ways to Support a Mission

Make Your Giving Go Further

For years, Pam Gardiner has helped Missoulians go farther; she has coached marathoners and created opportunities for runners and walkers of all paces to find their place in the running community. Now, she and her husband, Lyle Geurts, have found another way to go farther: **making the most of their charitable giving through tax-smart options.**

About a decade ago, Pam and Lyle **found themselves navigating a situation familiar to many families.** Lyle's parents were aging in Wisconsin, 1,500 miles away, and the choices about their care were increasingly complicated.

They turned to Missoula Aging Services for guidance.

"We left knowing **we had found a trustworthy source** of useful information presented clearly and with compassion," Pam recalls. Their connection to MAS grew. Lyle took a class for caregivers, and Pam sought Medicare guidance and participated in two evidence-based classes, Aging Mastery and A Matter of Balance. Eventually, **the couple made MAS one of the primary recipients of their charitable giving.**

This year, Pam found a new way to make their support go further. On the advice of her financial advisor, she began giving directly from her IRA. **The tax savings helped Pam and Lyle double their regular gift to MAS!**



Pam Gardiner and Lyle Geurts at home.

Pam's experience is one example of how tax-smart giving can benefit both you and the causes you care about. Depending on your circumstances, giving through an IRA, appreciated stock, or a donor advised fund may offer **opportunities to make your charitable dollars go further.**



To learn more about tax-smart ways to support Missoula Aging Services, email me directly at elandsiedel@missoulaagingservices.org. I'd be happy to connect with you.

Emily Landsiedel
Director of Development

MAS Staff News

Missoula Aging Services celebrates the heart, dedication, and talent of our team. These moments of growth remind us of the hard work that makes our mission come alive.

TINA GOTTFRIED joined MAS as a Client Support Specialist, bringing more than 20 years of experience in supportive services, caregiving, case management, program coordination, and leadership. She focuses on building trusting relationships, helping people maintain independence and quality of life, and providing compassionate, individualized support.

We welcome **CATHY ORR** as Community Services Manager, a new position designed to provide additional leadership and support as we continue to develop and strengthen programs. Cathy brings creativity, energy, generosity, and extensive nonprofit leadership experience to MAS, along with genuine enthusiasm for engaging with the community.

PROMOTIONS & POSITION CHANGES

Join us in congratulating **TAMMY GATES** on her promotion to **Nutrition Program Manager**. Since joining MAS as the Congregate Meal Program Coordinator less than two years ago, Tammy has transformed the Community Table from an idea into a thriving program. Now, she steps into a leadership role supporting a nutrition program that provides more than 100,000 meals annually to over 1,000 clients.

EMILY LANDSIEDEL has been promoted to **Director of Development**. Her leadership, dedication, and impact on our development efforts have long exceeded her former title. This change accurately reflects the work she does and the responsibility she carries for our agency every day, and we're thrilled to make it official!

We are pleased to announce the promotion of **SUMER PELLETT** to **In-Home Services Manager**. Sumer joined MAS as part of the Resource Department, bringing a thoughtful approach and experience in systems, operations, and management. Sumer will provide leadership and oversight for Veteran Directed Care, In-Home Support Services, and the Caring Companions programs.

RETIREMENT

After many years of dedicated service to Missoula Aging Services, we are celebrating the retirement of our Nutrition Program Manager, **DEAN THOMPSON**. Dean has been at the heart of our nutrition programs, ensuring that thousands of older adults receive meals plus connection and a friendly face at the door. His commitment to MAS's clients, volunteers, and mission has made a lasting difference throughout our community. We are incredibly grateful for the knowledge, kindness, humor, and dedication Dean has shared with all of us. His impact will remain part of the program he helped build and strengthen.

Please join us in wishing Dean a wonderful next chapter filled with family and plenty of time to enjoy new adventures!

337 Stephens Ave | Missoula, MT
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MAS Events

IN-PERSON NEW TO MEDICARE WORKSHOP

Wednesday, November 18, from 12 to 1:30 pm.
Missoula Aging Services
337 Stephens Ave., Missoula, MT 59801
Register online: <https://medicaremas.eventbrite.com>

VIRTUAL NEW TO MEDICARE WORKSHOP

Wednesday, October 28, from 6 to 7:30 pm.
Register online: virtualnewtomedicaremas.eventbrite.com

IN-PERSON MATTER OF BALANCE

Thursdays from 1:00 to 2:30 pm, Oct. 22 - Dec. 17.
Greater Good Health
2230 North Reserve Street, Suite 110, Missoula, MT 59808
Register online: MatterofBalance-Library.eventbrite.com

IN-PERSON TECH CAFE

First Monday of each month from 1 to 3 pm.
Missoula Aging Services
337 Stephens Ave., Missoula, MT 59801
Check in at the front desk when you arrive. No cost

VIRTUAL CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUPS

Second Monday of each month from 4 to 5 pm.
Third Tuesday of each month from 1 to 2 pm.
Participate online using Zoom. No cost.
Register online: <https://bit.ly/2YkyVPU>

IN-PERSON CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUPS

Fourth Wednesday of each month from 2 to 3 pm.
Missoula Aging Services
337 Stephens Ave., Missoula, MT 59801
Check in at the front desk when you arrive. No cost.

VIRTUAL MEMORY LOSS CONVERSATIONS

Thursdays from 10 to 11 am. New attendees welcome!
Participate online using Zoom. No cost.
Facilitated by Dementia Friendly Missoula.
Register online: <https://bit.ly/3ITnAsY>

View a full list of events at MISSOULAAGINGSERVICES.ORG