**A Valuable Friendship**

by Amanda Baushke

I vividly remember the first time I met my best friend. We were randomly paired as roommates our freshman year at a small, private college in Michigan. The school had snail mailed information cards so we would be able to connect prior to our arrival. When Nikki called my parents’ house, my mom answered, who proceeded to share that I was at a summer camp lifeguarding for children with bleeding disorders. Nikki then responded in a resume-esque way sharing all *her* great attributes. Each of us nervously dreaded the arrival of meeting the “goody two-shoes” roommate in person.

Nikki, one of the most accomplished and confident people I know, was not happy about moving away from home. When I arrived on campus, it was apparent that she had been crying all day. Her parents pulled me aside to share that she had rarely made it through an entire week of summer camp. I had no idea how to respond.

Those first few days in Newberry Hall were the bud that blossomed into a beautiful friendship. Twenty-two years later and now living 1100 miles apart, she is still the first person I call during major life experiences. However, facing the mundane happenings of life with her is what I truly value.

Research shows that social relationships are important—very important. In fact, they are shown to have as much impact on physical health as blood pressure, smoking, physical activity, and obesity. A meta-analysis by House, Landis and Umberson, found a 50 percent increase in survival of people with robust social relationships, regardless of age, gender, country of origin, or how such relationships were defined. That means that this friendship I’ve cherished over the years, not only provides me with a sense of connectedness in tough times, it provides protection from social isolation and other risk factors.

You may have heard the quote attributed to Jim Rohn sharing that “You’re the average of the five people you spend the most time with.” In David Burkus’ book, *Friend of a Friend: Understanding the Hidden Networks That Can Transform Your Life and Your Career*, he suggests that the influence of those around you goes well beyond the five people mentioned by Rohn. In fact, you are even influenced by the friends of your friends. Longitudinal studies show that the habits of the people in your life influence your behaviors and are therefore shown to increase or decrease the likelihood of obesity, smoking and even levels of happiness.

This information is often used to motivate people to seek out friendships and business partnerships with those who will influence them to be successful. I believe it’s also a reason why where you live matters. My friend and colleague, Dr. Roger Landry, coined this term (Where You Live Matters) and uses it to share the importance of choosing an environment that will contribute to individual growth, resilience and purposeful longevity. Alma College filled those buckets for me and along with a stellar education I gained values I will carry with me throughout my life—including the value of good friendship.

The opportunity to focus on individual growth, resilience and purposeful longevity is essential at every stage of life. I benefitted from my surroundings during my college years and was drawn to the senior living industry as I saw a need for environments that provided that same opportunity for older adults. And that’s exactly what I found—senior living communities all over the country that provide opportunities for the people who live there to flourish. The residents at senior living communities benefit from opportunities for social connectedness and a focus on health and well-being in the same ways that Nikki and I benefitted from our environment at Alma College.

Being part of a community—any community or group of people—can provide you with social connections and an environment that will positively benefit your health. I invite you to spend some time identifying the people and communities that make you who you are. Then, acknowledge them with some form of gratitude.

After all the worry in the weeks leading up to college, it turned out Nikki and I were exactly where we needed to be with a “goody-two shoed” roommate—we were positively impacting one another in ways that have benefitted us well beyond our years at Alma College. And for that, I will be forever grateful.