

# Engaging with Friends in the City

Milestone page 15

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**'FitC' helped Mary (left) and Sal Scialla settle into life in the city.**

Photo by Pamela Noguerras

Mary and Sal Scialla were new to Philadelphia and looking to make new friends and explore what the city had to offer when they joined Friends in the City (FitC) two years ago. Both recently retired, they thought city living might meet their needs at this stage of their lives. They were familiar with the city through frequent visits when their children attended college here. “We knew the city had a lot to offer in terms of history and the arts,” says Sal Scialla, a retired physician. But moving here from Scranton after their children had graduated and settled elsewhere proved daunting in the beginning.

“We did not know anyone,” says Mary Scialla, a retired hospital pastoral care specialist. Often the friends you make are those you meet through your children’s activities or through the workplace, she says. With their children grown and the couple no longer working, traditional social connections were not readily available.

Then they learned about FitC, a social organization that had its roots in a small Quaker-oriented retirement community, based at the Riverfront, a multi-generational condominium building at 22 South Front St. It began with a small group of senior citizens who moved into the building with the intention of creating a community where they could gather to share meals, exercise, converse and participate in activities on the premises and citywide.

While that residential program has grown slightly and remains important,

FitC now focuses primarily on an expanding array of activities that draws senior participants from diverse living situations. It numbers nearly 400 members from Center City and beyond. As noted on its website, its goals are “to take full advantage of city living, to socialize with each other, to give back to the community, and to enhance our healthy aging and enjoyment of life.” Non-residents of the Riverfront pay a \$65 annual membership fee to join.

“When someone mentioned FitC to us, we jumped at the suggestion,” Mary Scialla says. “We’ve met some wonderful people and done some wonderful things,” she says.

Like the Sciallas, retired teacher Pam Freyd, a longtime Rittenhouse Square resident, is enthusiastic about what the organization provides. FitC offerings span health and fitness, cultural, educational, creative, volunteer, and dining group activities and events, all organized by members for members, says Freyd, FitC board member and program chair. “If you count the monthly meetings of book clubs, play reading, knitting or other special interest groups, there are about 70 events going on each month,” says Freyd. “My favorites are the book club, play reading and the walking groups.

“Research tells us that social engagement is a key to successful aging,” Freyd says. “FitC offers the opportunity for social engagement with others who want to age in place in an urban environment and relish the wonderful diversity, theaters, restaurants, museums, concerts, the independence and the vitality that our city offers.

FitC members help each other do that.” Though non-denominational, FitC was inspired by the Quaker notion of community-building, according to Freyd. “The activities and ongoing groups are deliberately kept small in an effort to give people an opportunity to get to know each other,” she says. “I think what I enjoy the most is meeting other members when I am going about other aspects of my life. I like seeing people I know in the street or meeting them at concerts or the grocery store. I feel a greater connection to the community in which I have lived for so long.”

“I’ve been amazed at the friendliness,” says Mary Scialla. “I’ve enjoyed so many physical endeavors: walks around Rittenhouse Square, walks along the Schuylkill. It’s good to do this with people in the same situation. A majority of the people is retired like we are.” Sal Scialla concurs. “We walked across the Ben Franklin Bridge. That’s something we never would have done ourselves, but we did it with a group. There’s a picture of us on the bridge with the whole panorama of Center City behind us. We do flat walking with a tour guide. He’ll pick different spots in the city, and we’ll walk a mile. He’s picked places we’d never find otherwise and also introduced us to special types of eateries. We’re finding various spots in the city we never would have known. It’s been very fulfilling.”

To learn more about Friends in the City, call 267-639-5257, e-mail [info@friendscentercity.org](mailto:info@friendscentercity.org) or visit [www.friendscentercity.org](http://www.friendscentercity.org).

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