

## Legacy Letters

In 1995, when I started working at the Senior Center, I was rather embarrassed about my employment. I'd been looking for a job for quite some time, so when I did find something my friends were all very interested in what I was going to be doing. They would ask, I would offer a minimal response (probably while looking at the ground) and then there was an awkward silence. We all had a lot of preconceived notions about what it meant to be a senior and none of them were particularly good. Essentially, we figured it involved loss of independence, loneliness, frailty, senility, incompetence and long, boring days in which the biggest highlight was finding out what Vana was wearing on *Wheel of Fortune* that night.

A couple of weeks in to my employment I began to figure out that my concept of what it was to be a senior was way off base. These folks were happy, and I kept meeting Center participants like John and Wilma Conner. John and Wilma were so creative and provided so much assistance with programming it was kind of hard for me to keep up with them. Besides that, these two seniors were so obviously in love with each other I actually envied their relationship.

There were others that challenged my ideas about what being a senior was all about. Take unflappable Barbara Hackman, who kept me from making a jerk of myself every month as we taped *From the Mezzanine* for broadcast on public access television. At the time Barbara was a volunteer host for the program. Her composure and smart, sharp questions never failed to give me the appearance of actually knowing something.

One time, I was telling BeBe Ballantyne about my year long unsuccessful effort to sit on the floor with my legs extended in front of me and then bend over from the waist and touch my head to my knee. Bebe was rather surprised that I couldn't do this so, ignoring the fact that there was 30+ years difference in our ages I said, somewhat indignantly, "Can you?". That was a mistake. Before I took my next breath, she was sitting on the ground and bending over with her head resting comfortably on her knees. So much for frailty and dependence.

The seniors I kept running in to at work were so busy learning how to play in a band or taking yoga classes that if I wanted to see them about something I had to set up an appointment two weeks in advance. And, I learned very quickly that there was no senility or incompetence in this group. I'll never forget the first literature class I organized with Ray Heffner. When Ray told me he wanted to teach something related to Shakespeare, I figured this alliance was done for. Who in the world would want to study Shakespeare? I could see craft and cooking classes or maybe even a discussion of a less than challenging novel, but Shakespeare? To make a long story short, Ray's class was tremendously popular. In fact, there were a few people who were quite annoyed because they couldn't get in to the class—there was no room! Never again have I doubted the intellectual interests or capacities of older people.

These folks, and many others along the way, have taught me a lot about what it means to be a senior and how to make the best of retirement. First, aging is not something to dread. Ideas about inevitable loss of independence, loneliness, frailty, senility, incompetence and long, boring days being the inevitable result of aging are just wrong. It turns out that many of the things that were thought to be inevitable age-related losses are the result of lifestyle choices not aging.

John, Wilma, Barbara, BeBe, Ray and many others have shown me that it's up to each person to decide how they want to grow older. If you want your senior years to be rich and full, keep involved with friends, family and the community. Share what you know to enrich the lives of others, continue to try new things and exercise both your body and mind on a regular basis. Challenge yourself and realize the tremendous potential that exists within. It beats the heck out of sitting around waiting for Vana to walk out every night. Besides that, it has been shown that people who remain physically and mentally active and socially engaged have fewer medical appointments, take less prescribed medicine and remain healthier and happier than their less active counterparts. It's fun and good for your health!

It has been a long time since I've been embarrassed to tell anyone what I do for a living. I'm proud of what is happening at the Center and truly believe that it offers the best preventative medicine around. I've been taught by the experts and now, it's time for me to teach others what I know about growing older.

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