



Cooperative Extension



Matthew Kaplan, Ph.D.

State Extension Specialist
Intergenerational Programs and Aging
Department of Ag & Extension Education
(814) 863-7871

Ideas for Intergenerational Living

*a series of articles devoted to promoting cooperation
and exchange between the generations*

Article 6 (6/01):

THE COMING AGEQUAKE: BOOM OR BUST?

By 2150, demographers estimate that one-third of the world's population will be over 60 years old. In less than 100 years, three decades have been added to the average life span -- more than all of the years added over the past 5,000 years. Many consider this increase in longevity to be one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century.

This shift in population makeup is so dramatic that Ambassador Julia Alvarez, member of the Permanent Mission to the United Nations from the Dominican Republic, termed it an "AgeQuake." Most people agree that the AgeQuake will have a great impact on nations throughout the world. But the nature of this impact draws contentious debate.

I've grown accustomed to hearing diverse points of view about what a growing aged population means for our nation and the world. Viewpoints range from a "triumph of human civilization" to a "sure-shot formula for financial bankruptcy." But occasionally, I still read things that make my throat go dry.

A recent community newspaper article, "Increase in Elderly Requires Planning for Services They'll Need," spouted the typical alarmist message -- an aging population will undoubtedly threaten our financial solvency and pose big challenges to our health care, transportation and tax collection systems, etc. But what struck me was that the author did not mention one word about the other side of the story, which I had laid out in a 30-minute interview.

In our conversation, I had emphasized how we are witnessing an emerging group of active senior adults who are more healthy, vigorous and educated than at any other time in history. I noted that only 5 percent of people over 60 live in nursing homes. I relayed research by Duke University's Center for Demographic Studies that indicates we have seen a significant drop (15 percent) in disability in older adults in recent years.

I also quoted writers like Marc Freedman who, in his book, "Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America," referred to the growing aged population as our country's "only natural resource that is growing." I emphasized that senior

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adults display productive and civic-minded tendencies. Older adults, for example, vote at a higher rate and are more generous with their financial contributions than any other age group.

I noted a recent survey of 50- to 75-year-olds that indicated that most view retirement as a time to become more active and involved, start new activities and set new goals, rather than a time to rest from work and responsibilities. I described a growing national movement seeking to reinvent retirement, with many prominent intellectuals and policymakers at the forefront. These revolutionaries are forwarding ambitious plans for accommodating senior adults who want to take on bigger problem-solving roles for the country. Some proposals, as presented in Freedman's book, call for an "Elder Corps," a "Senior Corps," a "Wisdom Corps" or even a "national army of winter soldiers."

Considering all of the positive points I raised, I can't help but wonder why this author focused solely on the negative views and analyses. Maybe he was truly unable to envision how older adults can be anything other than disconnected, uncaring and unproductive. Or, maybe he felt an alarmist piece about impending disaster would make for a more powerful and provocative story. After all, don't stories about crises and mounting tensions have more public appeal than stories about cooperation and enhanced understandings?

But the public deserves the full story. Certainly, the AgeQuake poses challenges in health care, financial security and poverty. Yet, it also creates the chance for us to attain greater achievements in all domains of human pursuit, such as the arts, the care and education of young people and community development. If we make changes in our institutions to allow senior adults to contribute their time, talent and experience, the AgeQuake -- despite its dramatic sound -- can lead to a better quality of life for everyone.

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