

How Old is Old?

New Perspectives on Aging and Eldercare Services

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Today's Baby Boomers can expect that their retirement may last as long as 30 years or longer. It is the responsibility of the Jewish community to help people get the best out of the added years they have been given by facilitating their move through the transitions and developmental steps that characterize the needs of people from age 60 to 90 and older. Helping people age in place, making it easier for them to access eldercare information, and enabling them to fulfill their potential as volunteers or workers are three ways that the Jewish community fulfills this responsibility.

Recently, on a vacation in Baja California, my husband and I had the opportunity to go snorkeling. We found a cruise that was following whale sharks and then visiting a sea lion colony. When we got to the pier and joined the group, I could not help but notice that of the 15 people on the boat, more than half appeared to be older adults.

I began chatting with one of them, a very fit older woman, in a navy wetsuit, with beautiful gray hair streaming down her back. Sitting there in the sun, we began speaking about our work. She told me she worked in a library, and I would have guessed she was in her early sixties. I explained that I worked as Director of Eldercare Services at a Jewish Federation in New Jersey. When she heard what I did, she immediately asked me a very direct question: *How old is old?*

In response, we discussed what I consider my own "working" definition: when you have two or three chronic conditions that limit your ability to do things you enjoy, you're old. In response, she told me that both her knees and one hip had been re-

placed—and she is as active as ever. In her opinion, medical technology is transforming my definition of "old." In some ways getting old is like the Mastercard commercial—with the right care, it seems that people, rather than being "priceless," can be "ageless"—or can they?

In fact, research from the National Council on Aging shows that nearly half of the people aged 65 and older consider themselves middle-aged or young, and only 15% of people 75 and older consider themselves very old. However, there does seem to be some consensus across all ages that men are old at age 70, women at age 75. And if you ask college students, then you are old at age 50!

So, then I began to think about what are differences between *getting old* and *becoming older*?

Working and purchasing are two key elements of self-definition in our society. Therefore, people feel that they are getting old when they are forced into retirement or are sidelined from meaningful work. They also feel old when their level of consumption decreases. In addition, adults feel old

when they experience multiple losses, such as diminished health, reduced mobility, a smaller circle of living friends, and the loss of a spouse or other significant family members.

By comparison, we see *becoming older* as a time of reflection, where we gain insight and wisdom based on life experience. It is a time to pursue interests, develop mastery, and discover new interests and skills—if we have the health and wealth to enjoy it.

A 65-year-old today can expect to live to 84, based on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *Profile of Older Americans*. Those who are 85 or older are the fastest growing segment of the population. In New Jersey alone, there are projected to be a quarter-million of the “oldest old” by 2010. Their needs include the following:

- Health-related services that will preserve independence and the quality of life
- Supportive services to help oldest adults remain in their own homes, which are both their preference and more cost effective than institutionalization
- Help for their boomer children in coping with the three-headed hydra: work, raising their own children, and caring for their parents

Boomers may have changed the world—but they grew up in a transforming world. Boomers enjoyed TV, watched the first man land on the Moon, and experienced jet air travel—but their parents created those technologies, built the suburbs, and created the communities that nurtured them.

We tend to see “old” through the binary lens of these two generations: the “old” of the 1960s Great Society that created Medicare, the Older Americans Act, senior centers, and congregate meal programs based on the image of the poor elderly widow eating cat food, living alone. Or, through the AARP centerfold perspective embodying “ageless beauty” and “timeless vitality” of being forever young—at 60.

To simplify complicated issues, we see them in extremes—in black and white—

although the reality lies in between, in the gray area. That is where most people and families experience challenges and opportunities related to aging.

WHAT IS IN THE GRAY AREA?

According to the National Council on Aging’s report, *Americans’ Perception of Aging in the 21st Century*, retirement is not an event, but a process. Of people aged 65 and older, 42% work, 23% are retired and working, and 58% are “completely retired.” Of those who are 75 and older, 34% of people work, 20% are retired and working, and two-thirds of them are “completely retired.”

With the health and relative wealth enjoyed by older people, retirement is a time of pursuing education and adventures. Consider that the *average* age of all students (from kindergarten through senior programs) registered in the state of California is 40 years old and that community colleges are swamped with mature students. Elderhostel provides educational trips for 400,000 older learners annually, and an entire whole travel industry caters to older adults.

Retirement means figuring out what to do with the rest of your life—which may be upward of 30 years.

JEWISH COMMUNAL RESPONSES TO AGING TRENDS

The Jewish community has a larger percentage of older members than does the general population, and its members generally live longer as well, given their good access to health services and relative affluence. Thus, it has a vested interest in developing programs that meet the evolving needs of older adults, that help people move through the transitions and developmental steps that characterize the needs of people from age 60 to 90 and older.

The Jewish community is at the forefront in developing community-based or NORC (naturally occurring retirement communities) programs, which identify concentra-

tions of older adults and “wrap” services around neighborhoods or even specific apartment buildings to provide services efficiently. Through such programs, the Jewish community helps older adults “age in place”—living in their own homes, remaining healthy, and staying vitally connected to their community. In MetroWest, our “Parshippany LIVE” program and the House Calls programs are examples of these types of multiagency collaborative services.

Federations and Jewish communal agencies are also making eldercare information easier to access by putting information online, developing print directories, and by dedicating professional staff to addressing information and referral questions from families. The Eldercare page within the UJC MetroWest website, our “A to Z Guide to Eldercare Services,” and the new Elderlink program being initiated by Jewish Family Service are examples of this type of interagency collaboration.

In addition, traditional services are offered along the “well to frail” continuum, as illustrated by the range of services provided by agencies in the MetroWest community.

- The JCC provides activity centers, group trips and classes, cultural events, holiday celebrations, and hot and home-delivered kosher meals.
- A range of housing options are available that let older members of the community remain in the community: apartments, independent living, and assisted living facilities are provided through the Jewish Community Housing Corporation.
- Spiritual support and care are available through Joint Chaplaincy and the MetroWest Health and Healing Center.

- Jewish Family Service is a full-service social service agency that helps older adults and their families cope with the changes of aging through consultation, care planning, care management, and counseling.
- Skilled nursing care, a rehabilitation unit, adult day programs, a work-center, and an Alzheimer’s unit are all within Daughters of Israel.
- JVS, consistent with its mission of maximizing individual’s abilities, is helping older adults get the tools they need to create their own “third age” and realize their full potential through the new Ronald I. Coun Center for Creative Maturity. In addition it provides in-home help through its Caregiving Companions and assistance with home repairs through Home Maintenance Solutions. Both programs hire older workers, and JVS has been on the leading edge of promoting the benefits of employment for older people through its “Maturity Works” program.

**AS BETTE DAVIS ONCE SAID,
“GETTING OLD IS NOT
FOR SISSIES”**

As more of us live longer, we will need help figuring out how to get the best out of the added years we have been given, which may be a 30-year span. We will need access to information and readily available services for our aging parents; meaningful roles as workers, volunteers, and leaders in our communities; and policies and programs that encourage aging in place and in community. Our entire society is aging, and growing older is not a spectator sport.

Just ask the snorkeling librarian.