

# RECONNECTING WITH YOUTH IN RETIREMENT

by Gail S. Eisen

"Intergenerational Warfare." "Fierce Competition Over Scarce Resources." "Widening Gulf Between the Generations." Against a backdrop of strident and incessant media attention to the potential resource rivalry between the generations, there still exist countless numbers of retirees who wish to contribute meaningfully to the lives of younger people.

During the course of a three-year study of the activities, needs for personal space and privacy, level of satisfaction with the marital relationship and life within the household of recent retirees, one of the most memorable interview responses came from a former internist who was asked to offer some advice for prospective retirees based on his own experience of retirement. He paused pensively for several minutes when considering this question and then remarked, "I think it is important to reach out to younger people in the later stages of life. Fortunately, I am still in contact with some of the medical students—I have the chance to work with them extensively during their hospital rotations—and it is one of the most gratifying parts of my life. But this applies to contact with children, too. Being in contact with people of very different ages is very important."

His comment did not stand alone; during the course of my lengthy interviews with retired couples, I began to hear a pattern emerging, a pattern suggesting that sizeable num-

bers of retirees were discovering deep meaning by dedicating their new-found time in retirement to involvements with young people.

A retired professor from a large Midwestern university, for instance, reflected on his greatest satisfactions in the retirement stage and spoke immediately of the increased time he was now able to spend with his children and grandchildren. With a slight hint of guilt, he referred to the severe time-constraints and feelings of intense pressure he had faced while working full time. These pressures had combined to prevent him from "helping out" in the ways he had wished to. Now, in retirement, he was able to visit his adult children several times a week, and he described his happiness in being able to help them with home remodeling projects and childcare tasks. His comments and the feelings he displayed during the interview reflected the deep gratification of a man who was finally able to offer nurturance, care and guidance to several generations within his family.

Readers will perhaps recognize a link here to Erik Erikson's seventh stage of the life cycle, the stage in which the essential human struggle is conceptualized as the choice between "generativity versus stagnation." Reaching out to youth and offering guidance, nurturance and service most definitely offers a parallel to the experience of "generativity" in Erikson's schema, as well as to the concept of "mentoring" proposed in Daniel Levinson's work on adult development.

A third example of this pattern of reaching out to young people comes from the wife of a retired automobile assembly-line worker who decided to volunteer with a community organization that helps unmarried teenage parents to learn basic parenting skills. The woman reported enthusiastically on her most recent assignment, escorting a soon-to-be-mother, age 15, on a shopping trip for baby clothes and infant-care necessities. En route to the various stores, she was able to offer the adolescent some childrearing tips and share her knowledge of infant behavior, all of which were very much appreciated by this child on the verge of becoming a parent.

A fourth and final example comes from a retired engineer from Southern California who described his satisfaction in serving as a volunteer with the Dedicated Older Volunteers in Education (DOVE) program in the Los Angeles school system. The program places older adults in various K-12 volunteer positions within the public schools of Los Angeles. This retiree served as a volunteer within a high school English department. He spoke repeatedly of his satisfaction in helping students to improve their writing skills, complete lengthy humanities projects and deal with familial problems occurring in their lives.

How do preretirement planning program representatives work with this concept? A critical element of any preretirement planning program is to encourage retirees to consider ways to replace work-based friend-

ships and activities well in advance of retirement. This notion of connecting with youth can easily be mentioned as a source of significant gratification for many recent retirees and can be integrated into existing program segments focusing on "activities in retirement" or "changing family relationships in the retirement years."

Of course, the concept is by no means limited to acts of support and service within North America. The idea can easily be woven into existing segments on "overseas volunteer opportunities," and information can be presented about working exclusively with international youth within the context of the Peace Corps, Doctors Without Borders and other international agencies.

In sum, reaching out to younger people, both kin and non-kin, is one viable method of replacing lost work roles and is consistent with the ideals of caring and concern for future generations described so eloquently by lifespan researchers over the last several decades. It is a source of mutual gratification that is expected without question in most other countries and cultures of the world. In the words of an ancient African proverb, one that is gaining wider recognition in an America plagued by routine and unbridled aggression, excessive individualism, low levels of social responsibility and human brutality unimaginable only a generation ago, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

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