

THE POWER OF PURPOSEFUL AGING

# PURPOSE+



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CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF AGING

SUMMIT PARTICIPANTS >

# THE POWER OF PURPOSEFUL AGING

**Culture Change and the New Demography**

Report from the 2016 Purposeful Aging Summit

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### About the Milken Institute

The Milken Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank determined to increase global prosperity by advancing collaborative solutions that widen access to capital, create jobs, and improve health. We do this through independent, data-driven research, action-oriented meetings, and meaningful policy initiatives.

### About the Center for the Future of Aging

The mission of the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging is to improve lives and strengthen societies by promoting healthy, productive and purposeful aging.

 @MIAging    @MilkenCFA    Future of Aging  
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### Acknowledgments

Our work to advance the cause of purposeful aging could not progress without the dedicated efforts of colleagues who share our aspirations. Many people have played a part in the success of the Purposeful Aging Summit and of this report, which captures the spirit and insights of the event. I want to acknowledge several of them for their valuable contributions.

My gratitude to Arielle Burstein for her help in organizing the Summit and preparing the materials that informed our conversations. I am grateful as well to Rita Beamish for her words and efforts as my principal writing collaborator, to Edward Silver for his critical eye and editorial prowess, and to Jane Lee for her creative and thoughtful design work. My appreciation to Bryan Quinan and Nancy McHose for their help planning the event, and to my assistant, Shantika Maharaj, for her dependable support. Liana Soll, Sophie Okolo, and Sindhu Kubendran also deserve recognition for their valued efforts at the Center for the Future of Aging.

My special thanks to our Purposeful Aging Summit participants and to the members of our Board of Advisors. We're honored to work with this exceptional group of leaders. Finally, let me express my deep appreciation to the John Templeton Foundation for its support. The Foundation's dedication to research and activities that elevate purposeful living inspires our daily work.

### Paul Irving

Chairman  
Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging  
Santa Monica, Calif.

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### PREFACE

**With people living longer than ever and the world's older population expanding at an unprecedented rate, the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging convened the Purposeful Aging Summit in Los Angeles in 2016. Thought leaders from public policy, business, academia, philanthropy, and media gathered to discuss reframing perceptions of aging in the 21st century. The participants acknowledged the importance of overcoming deeply ingrained bias, and the need to shed light on the compelling but little-understood benefits of purposeful aging. They recognized the upside of changing the culture of aging for individuals old and young. This report summarizes the themes, findings, and vision of the Purposeful Aging Summit.**

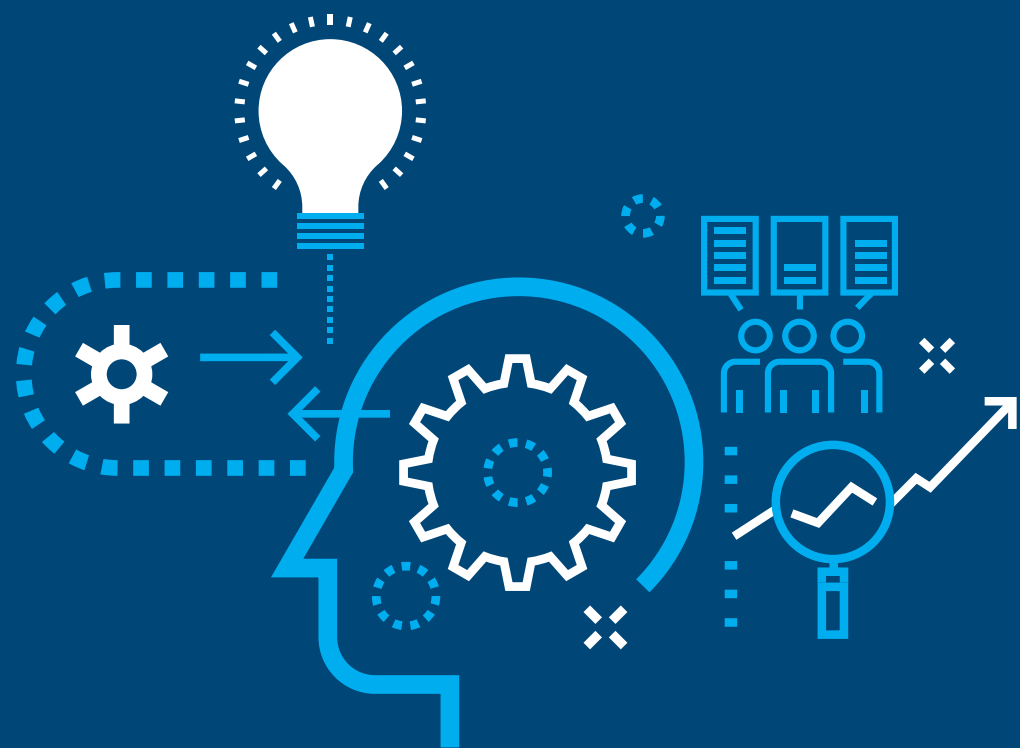


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As a society, we tend to believe that each generation is an insular one, and that the interests of each are unique and separate from those of others. But now more than ever, people young and old must join forces to address problems that affect both of their communities.

”

**MICHAEL EISNER**



## PURPOSE IN ACTION

Countless older Americans are making a difference in their communities and the world by embracing their later years with creativity, purpose, and passion.

They are volunteers for social causes and civic organizations. They are engaged in encore careers.

They are mentors for young people and caregivers for one another. Throughout this report, we highlight ordinary people whose commitment demonstrates the vitality and productivity of older lives.

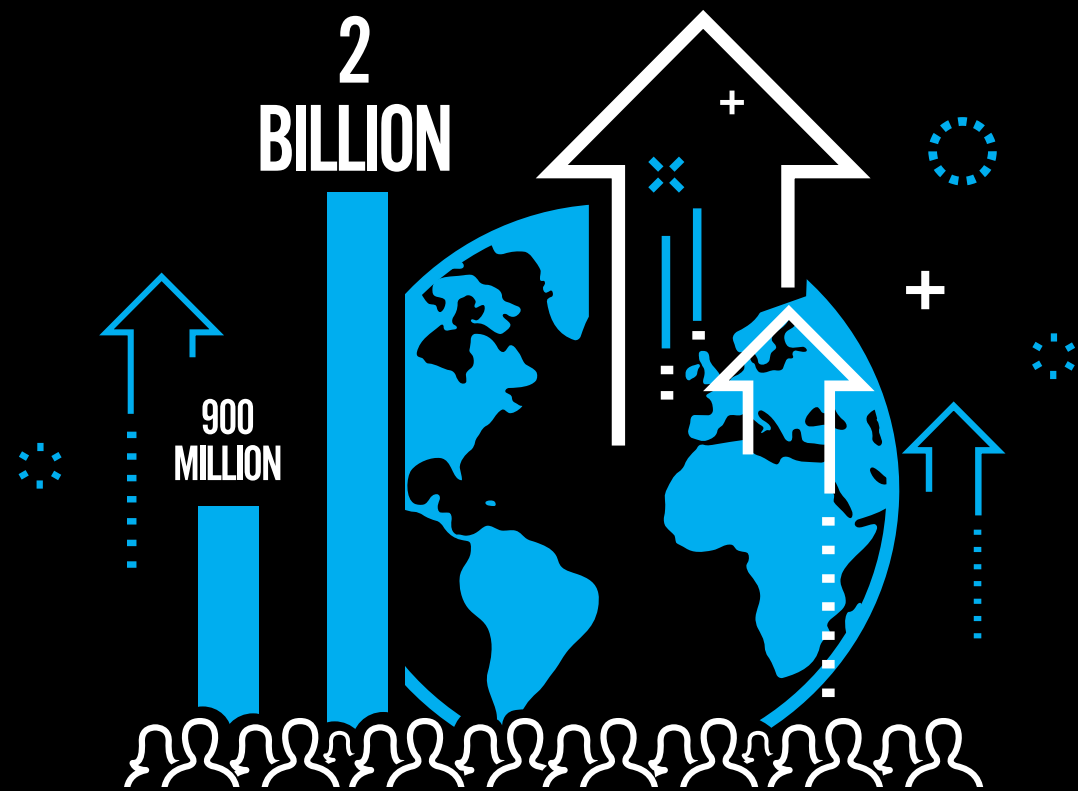


PURPOSE IN ACTION



**DIANE RALEIGH** | Co-Founder, Olmoti Clinic

As a former Peace Corps volunteer, Diane Raleigh never forgot about the great need she saw among Africa's marginalized populations. At the age of 70, still enjoying her career as a clinical psychologist in Palo Alto, Calif., she decided to do something about it. Raleigh co-founded the Olmoti Clinic in remote northern Tanzania, aiding an impoverished Maasai community. She also serves as executive director of its operating trust, singlehandedly raising money for the clinic. Proving that one person can change lives, Raleigh has transformed the community by building a pipeline to provide fresh water and constructing a primary school for children who can't make the long, dangerous trek to the nearest village school. | [OlmotiClinic.org](http://OlmotiClinic.org)



## AS THE WORLD TURNS, IT AGES

World population age 60 and over is projected to increase from 900 million in 2015 to 2 billion by 2050.

Those age 80 and older will quadruple. In the United States, the 65-plus cohort will nearly double to 83.7 million from 43.1 million.

Sources: World Health Organization, U.S. Census Bureau.



### PURPOSE IN ACTION



#### HENRY ROCK

Founder and Executive Director, City Startup Labs

Henry Rock had an epiphany at age 60: He wanted to foster a “reimagining” of black male millennials in the eyes of society and the young men themselves. Summoning his experience as a media executive and insights he gained from successful entrepreneurs, he launched City Startup Labs in 2014 with financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation. The Charlotte, N.C., organization instructs African Americans between 18 and 34 on launching their own businesses. Now in its third year and newly housed at the University of North Carolina, CSL focuses on character and critical thinking as well as entrepreneurial how-tos, culminating in student pitches in front of potential investors and local businesspeople. | [citystartuplabs.com](http://citystartuplabs.com)

# WHEN PURPOSE AND AGING MERGE

**The world is crossing a demographic frontier. While it is foreign to us in many ways, the landscape on the other side holds great possibilities.**

Every day in the United States, 10,000 people mark their 65th birthdays. One in five Americans will have passed this milestone in 2030, and the global population aged 60 and over is projected to total more than 2 billion by midcentury, up from 900 million in 2015.<sup>1</sup> While this profound shift has stirred widespread concerns, it brings boundless opportunities to change millions—perhaps billions—of lives for the better. And they are only beginning to be recognized.

The evidence from numerous studies tells us that the record number of older adults is a unique human capital resource. Its sheer size demands that we explore its vast potential and employ it for the betterment of our world. At the same time, many aging adults fear that their “golden years” won’t be golden at all. Concerns about health, safety, and financial security loom large for people in their 60s and beyond. Furthermore, while advances in public health, science,

and economic development have given us the gift of longevity, age prejudice remains, so ingrained that it flourishes underrecognized and unacknowledged deep in our collective psyche. In today’s culture, adding more years to our lives does not necessarily mean adding more life to our years.

## **Purpose and Potential**

The new longevity landscape does hold powerful prospects, however, if we open doors to this human resource. A growing body of research suggests that aging with purpose offers solutions not just to problems inherent in aging itself, but to an array of other challenges that demand attention. Older adults can infuse societies with transformative social and economic benefits. Through their insight and ability to mentor, they help the young learn and develop. As caregivers and volunteers, they help one another age with dignity and provide invaluable support. In work settings, they bring perspective, experience, and emotional stability. Let’s celebrate the fact that the aging population is, in the words of Encore.org CEO Marc Freedman, “our only increasing natural resource.”

The underpinning of these assertions is not soft science or speculation. It is well documented, although not well recognized, that older adults offer unique contributions and that they gain mentally and physically through

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The afternoon of life is just as full of meaning as the morning; only, its meaning and purpose are different.

”

**CARL JUNG**





## TROUBLING SIGNS By Laura Carstensen

**The timing of the purposeful aging movement is critical. Sobering findings from the Stanford Center on Longevity's Sightlines project add urgency and a potential red flag: 55-to-64-year-olds are less socially engaged now than their predecessors were 20 years ago. They are less likely to be married or involved in religious organizations. They don't interact as much with neighbors and have weaker ties to family and friends.**

**Traditional modes of engagement are waning for all age groups, but the greatest decline is among those on the cusp of old age. While it's not clear if workplace or online socializing may be compensating for these shortcomings, the startling findings have serious implications for our aging society. Social engagement is a key to improving health and longevity, and it is critical for societies to utilize the human capital represented in older citizens.**

**Feeling connected to others is crucial to physical and mental health. More than ever, it's important that people between middle and advanced age flourish psychologically, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. Finding purposeful engagement may be just what aging adults need, as research suggests that volunteering promotes overall well-being.**

**Because of the size of the boomer cohort, the norms they set will not only have short-term ramifications, but may endure for generations. A great deal is at stake. If boomers establish expectations about giving back to communities and investing in younger generations, they can put the United States on track to become a better nation. In contrast, if they bow out and withdraw—as our Sightlines project suggests they may—we risk a dimmer future.**

purposeful activity. Studies associate volunteerism, for instance, with lower rates of mortality and depression, increased strength and energy, decreased symptoms of depression, and delayed physical disability.<sup>2</sup> Purpose—engagement and working toward goals as we age—is important for longevity as well as vitality, productivity, and lower rates of cognitive decline, stroke, and heart attack.<sup>3</sup>

“We have a tremendous opportunity to improve public health if we can get older people engaged, feeling purposeful and more proactive,” says neuro-psychologist Patricia Boyle of the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center at Rush University Medical Center. “The potential health and economic benefits of increasing purpose in older persons are likely huge.”

Older individuals want a sense of purpose in their remaining years; they want to contribute.<sup>4</sup> Enjoying an additional three decades of life, on average, compared to what our forebears could expect at the start of the 20th century, today's aging adults have the time to explore those goals. Indeed, the nation and the world can benefit from their engagement: Issues of race, gender, and religion divide us; inequities in education and justice constrain the potential of so many young people; political and social institutions need repair; and policymakers can't seem to find solutions. Beneficially engaged older adults can help fill the gaps.

“We need the assets of our many older people to make our nation stronger: their experience and expertise, their ability to analyze problems and help fix them, their continued desire to leave the world a better place, and their time,” states Linda Fried, dean and DeLamar professor of public health at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. She adds: “An important key to aging successfully is feeling that our lives are meaningful, that we have created something that will endure beyond us. At every age we need some structure in our lives and a reason to get up in the morning. Without it, sickness and earlier death are more likely.”

### Missing the Boat

However, our cultural frames of reference have not caught up to reality, with scant recognition of older individuals' potential. Long established and uninformed stereotypes shroud aging behind a negative lens that celebrates all things young while overlooking scientific evidence about the strengths of older adults. Virtually all forms of media and messaging reinforce these misperceptions.

Older adults are not done with the world, but the world, cocooned in a culture that extols the virtues of youth, may be done with them. Ready for new beginnings, they are routinely shuffled to the sidelines and the shadows of decline. If older adults are to find meaningful roles that fulfill their enormous potential, attitudes must change.

This is a powerful story about promise for societies everywhere, but it is obscured by a culture bound to pre-21st century ideas. We need fresh ways to frame and communicate this story. We need a movement to make the case for purposeful aging that can enrich us all, a movement that upends cultural assumptions.

At the same time, we can accelerate the worthy but piecemeal efforts that already promote purposeful aging. We can build up pathways for encore careers and support successful programs like AARP Foundation's Experience Corps, the federal Senior Corps, and other impactful examples of older people making a difference. We can advocate for additional resources to spread and scale effective programs. We can enhance awareness and understanding through storytelling and media strategies.

### Setting the Trend

Intergenerational conversations and collaboration—the engagement of millennials, Gen-Xers, baby boomers, and the Greatest Generation alike—are an important part of this movement. All will gain when older people are enabled to live with purpose.

There's much at stake for the future. The way today's aging adults interact with their communities, and the values and priorities they uphold, will set patterns for those who come after them—generations that are expected to enjoy even longer lives. By setting new norms for serving others, they are defining a course that can lead to a better world.<sup>5</sup>

The 21st century challenges older people to invent this new world of aging with purpose. With the opportunities of extended longevity ahead, baby boomers must step up and join in efforts to redefine this stage of life rather than accepting yesterday's norms. Summoning their sizable reserves of confidence and creativity, they can establish a new era of aging as a multifaceted, productive experience.

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We need the assets of our many older people to make our nation stronger: their experience and expertise, their ability to analyze problems and help fix them, their continued desire to leave the world a better place, and their time.

”

LINDA FRIED



**JEANNE PINDER** | Founder and CEO, [ClearHealthCosts.com](http://ClearHealthCosts.com)

Jeanne Pinder founded [ClearHealthCosts.com](http://ClearHealthCosts.com) to help people grapple with one of the nation's biggest problems—medical costs, and the confusion around why a simple colonoscopy costs \$913 in one place and \$2,700 in another. The lifelong journalist left the *New York Times* and launched a company that gathers and posts individual providers' prices, making a difference for people who may even forgo medical care, believing they can't afford it. "People need help on this," Pinder says. "And journalists like us are the right people to do it." Starting in New York with grant funding, [ClearHealthCosts.com](http://ClearHealthCosts.com) has expanded into three additional markets. Pinder helps sustain the growing business by developing and providing software services and through editorial consultation with partners. | [ClearHealthCosts.com](http://ClearHealthCosts.com)



“

We must shift the narrative from fear and denial to an embrace of aging, move from a back-to-youth or regression orientation to a purposeful new way of being, and move from older people being a burden to being an asset to society as a whole.

”

**AI-JEN POO**



## A HEALTHY SELF-IMAGE

Seven and a half years—that was the longevity boost for study participants who had positive self-perceptions of aging, compared to those without. And people who scored high on a purpose assessment fended off Alzheimer’s disease better than low scorers.

Source: Becca R. Levy et al., Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.



PURPOSE IN ACTION



**BEV BARTLETT** | Memory Cafe Volunteer

After a career that began with teaching, then progressed to positions with local aging commissions and the Alzheimer’s Association, Bev Bartlett “retired” and asked herself, “What am I going to do with the rest of my life?” Today the 71-year-old serves on several aging-related committees and volunteers about 15 hours a week in Brown County, Wis., at “memory cafes,” which enable dementia sufferers and their caregivers to gather and socialize. Her husband is a volunteer also, and Bartlett says their service enhances their relationship. “I found people are much happier when they have something to give, and I’m receiving much more than I get. My volunteer work makes me feel better about myself.” | [Alzheimerscafe.com](http://Alzheimerscafe.com)

# THE CASE FOR PURPOSEFUL AGING

**Science increasingly holds that the new world of aging makes purpose a logical, productive, and obvious imperative.**

Research tells us that:

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With maturity, people develop an intrinsic urge to give back

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The attributes of older people mesh neatly with the needs of youth

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Purpose is tied to older adults' physical and mental well-being, and even mortality

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An engaged older population provides economic benefits, from workplace, taxation, and consumer impacts to the value of charitable and volunteer work

The generative impulse manifests as a drive to leave a positive legacy. Aging adults seek to address the needs of successor generations in a range of ways and share their wisdom for the welfare of future societies.

Evidence finds that the benefits of their service also are mutual. Studies demonstrate that in doing good for others, people accrue physical and mental advantages themselves. Research also suggests that generativity is a cornerstone of successful aging, linked to satisfaction and overall well-being in later life.<sup>6</sup>

The shortening of life's horizons refocuses older people on mental processes that facilitate happiness. The aging brain actually improves in many ways, including in complex problem-solving and emotional stability—with intense moods giving way to larger perspectives and nuanced viewpoints.<sup>7</sup> This mental maturity often is linked to “wisdom,” which is a key to successful relationships and is associated with greater life satisfaction and longevity.<sup>8</sup>

The arrival of the largest-ever older population at a life stage that deepens wisdom and strengthens emotional balance, enhanced by the extensive education, experience, and skills of today's aging generation, raises hopeful prospects. If we channel these qualities, we can imagine vast possibilities for purposeful activity to improve lives, civic and charitable organizations, companies and economies, while embracing a self-reinforcing and vibrant older population.

## WHAT IS GENERATIVITY?

**When people move through middle adulthood, they begin to experience an impulse to “pass the torch” and use their knowledge, skills, and experience to improve life for future generations. The influential psychoanalyst Erik Erikson defined this urge as “generativity,” in effect a motivation to contribute to a better tomorrow.**

**The pattern dovetails with Laura Carstensen's theory of socioemotional selectivity, which holds that personal perceptions of time, specifically life's shortened horizons, play a fundamental role in how people select and pursue social goals. Seeing the years behind them stretching longer than the years ahead, they prioritize their activities, take a keener interest in the world outside themselves, and balance their emotions with greater wisdom. Things that were once stressful, they can now take in stride.**

### Good That Is Good for You

Volunteering is not the only pathway to purposeful living—people also find meaning and purpose at work and through family relationships and social activities—but research on volunteerism identifies it as an essential ingredient in the recipe for healthy aging.

- A study of intergenerational volunteerism found that older adults enjoyed a heightened sense of well-being from their interactions with youth. Older volunteers associated successful aging with staying active, not worrying about problems, feeling young, and keeping up with children and the community.<sup>9</sup>
- Older volunteers in a 2013 study experienced reduced risk of hypertension, delayed physical disability, enhanced cognition, and lower mortality. While the mechanisms of these correlations were not clear, researchers Dawn Carr, Linda Fried, and John Rowe identified the physical activity, cognitive engagement and social interaction aspects of volunteerism as contributing factors. It is especially striking in this research that while people who volunteer typically are thought to be wealthier, healthier, and more socially connected, many people from groups lower on the socioeconomic ladder, including older adults, regularly volunteer in their communities. And these volunteers exhibit disproportionately greater benefits from their service.<sup>10</sup>
- Harvard Medical School professor George Vaillant found that older people who achieved generativity through activities such as mentoring and supporting younger people were three times as likely as their uninvolved peers to experience joy instead of despair as they moved through their 70s.<sup>11</sup>
- A three-year study found that in the federally supported Foster Grandparents program, an arm of Senior Corps, 71 percent of foster grandparents reported almost never feeling lonely, compared to 45 percent of people who were on a waiting list to join the program.<sup>12</sup>
- UnitedHealth Group concluded in a 2013 survey that volunteerism is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, especially for older people. Survey respondents linked their volunteering to physical, mental, and emotional well-being. More than nine in 10 said volunteering improved their mood. Nearly eight in 10 said it lowered their stress levels, and three-quarters

said it made them feel physically healthier. About a quarter of them even said that volunteering helped them manage their chronic illnesses.<sup>13</sup> “Doing good is good for you,” UnitedHealth Group concluded in its report. “In all of the pathways we take to good health, being a volunteer can help to make a meaningful difference.”

### Purpose and Alzheimer’s

What about the illness that especially terrifies people over 65—Alzheimer’s disease?<sup>14</sup> Implications of the condition are well known, and many people have experienced the front-row agony of watching someone close fade into severe cognitive decline. A cure for Alzheimer’s and other dementias remains elusive, even as population aging expands the flow of cases into a torrent. One in nine Americans age 65 and over now suffers from Alzheimer’s, and by age 85, one-third are affected.<sup>15</sup> Without a medical breakthrough, the number will skyrocket to at least 14 million by midcentury, up from 5.2 million now.<sup>16</sup> The impacts are projected to be even greater in societies that are aging faster than America. Alzheimer’s represents a pressing global problem.

While cure is certainly the goal, any effective intervention would be of great value. Here again, the case for purpose is compelling.

Scientists have discovered that purposeful activity not only can slow cognitive decline, but also may delay the onset of Alzheimer’s and buffer its effects on the brain. These findings emerged when Patricia Boyle and her colleagues at the Rush Alzheimer’s Disease Center interviewed older adults about purpose in their lives, conducted cognitive testing and neurological exams, and examined brains postmortem for evidence of Alzheimer’s. They found that higher levels of purpose reduced harmful cognitive effects and slowed the rate of decline by about 30 percent, even when the brain already exhibited the disease’s damaging plaques and tangles.<sup>17</sup>

A separate longitudinal study spearheaded by Boyle found that people who reported having greater purpose in life were 2.4 times more likely to remain free of Alzheimer’s than those with lower self-reported purpose scores.<sup>18</sup>

To give these results context, it is important to note that science currently has no way to keep dementia-related



The science clearly indicates we have an opportunity to improve public health by helping older persons remain engaged and purposeful. We need to harness that, to let people know that having purpose helps people live longer and better and that there’s a biologic basis for health-protective effects of purpose in life. People don’t think purpose affects our biology, but science says it does. We need to better understand exactly how—and for that, we sorely need funding.



**PATRICIA BOYLE**

pathology from accumulating: Nearly all older people have some evidence of Alzheimer’s changes in their brains. Finding a way to mitigate its effects would be akin to discovering a magic pill.

### Benefits for Young and Old

The benefits of intergenerational activity are particularly striking for both young and old. We know that purposeful engagement is good for older people. As well, the very qualities they possess—the often-overlooked attributes that accompany this life stage—are well-suited to the needs of the younger generation, especially vulnerable children who have suffered stress or trauma, according to emerging research. Experience and empathy equip older adults for roles as tutors, mentors, coaches, and pillars of family support.<sup>19</sup>

The long-term results of such interaction can be dramatic. Scholars who study the obstacles confronting young people say that a key ingredient of future success is the steady presence of caring adults committed to their development.<sup>20</sup>

“While the needs and desires of older adults may appear to be a world apart from those of young people, at both ages, finding purposes to pursue can promote energy, resilience, life satisfaction, achievement, and health,” says William Damon, professor of education at Stanford University. “In our studies at Stanford, we have found that the most important support for a young person’s search is having an older adult mentor who models a purposeful life. The great potential of these relationships is that they can provide young people with access to essential mentoring at the same time as they offer older adults highly fulfilling sources of purpose.”

And Fernando Torres-Gil, professor of public policy and director of the Center for Policy Research on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles, notes that the nation’s growing ethnic diversity in tandem with the aging population provides new possibilities to collaborate across races and generations. “If we educate and engage a diverse young population, and at the same time promote aging with dignity and purpose,” he says, “we can realize powerful possibilities to cross bridges and create a vital synergy to strengthen our democracy.”

### Social Engagement

Purposeful activity fosters the intrinsic benefits of social interaction, which by definition decreases isolation

and its detrimental effects. In fact, social connectivity can promote wellness. A 2015 study found that socially isolated people are more prone to inflammation and illness and suffer higher mortality rates.<sup>26</sup> Social engagement also affects cognitive decline, and some researchers suggest it contributes to brain reserve—the brain’s ability to function even with physiological evidence of damage.<sup>27</sup> “Our social worlds influence not only our happiness in everyday life but the ways in which our brains process information, the levels of hormones circulating in our bodies, and our physiological responses to stress,” Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, notes.<sup>28</sup>

### Positivity and Purpose

Societal attitudes are a detrimental force when it comes to engaging our older population. Ageism continues to infect work and social settings, with the over-60 years pigeonholed as a time of decline and disability. Effectively shunting older people to society’s margins, this cultural negativity is internalized by older adults themselves. Our attitudes toward aging affect our health, our resilience in the face of adversity, and our very survival, according to Yale Professor Becca Levy, a pioneer in this field. Among numerous research findings:

- Levy and Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer report that where aging is viewed positively, older adults tend to perform better on memory tasks than they do where aging is seen in a negative light. They compared people in China and the American deaf community, who have relatively little exposure to negative stereotypes about aging, with hearing Americans who were exposed to such attitudes. The older deaf and Chinese participants outperformed older hearing Americans on memory tasks.
- In another study, older people with positive perceptions of aging were 44 percent more likely to recover from severe disability than those with negative age stereotypes.<sup>29</sup>
- Older adults with more positive perceptions of aging tended to practice more preventive health behaviors, in a research study that spanned more than two decades.<sup>30</sup>
- Even life expectancy is affected. Older people holding positive self-perceptions of aging lived on average 7.5 years longer than those with less positive views,



## A PROVEN MODEL: AARP FOUNDATION EXPERIENCE CORPS

**The AARP Foundation’s intergenerational Experience Corps literacy program offers a powerful model for impactful engagement by older adults. Older volunteers tutor schoolchildren, giving classroom teachers a welcome assist while establishing meaningful relationships with students. Their mentorship and role-modeling improves non-cognitive skills as well as reading scores, research shows. Reports of classroom misbehavior have decreased at many schools with Experience Corps tutors.<sup>21</sup>**

**Volunteer retention is high and the tutors themselves demonstrate greater physical activity and improved mental health compared to peers. Dramatic results from a Baltimore trial correlated Experience Corps participation with a halt or reversal of declining brain volume in areas vulnerable to dementia.<sup>22</sup> Neuroimaging showed, after six months, fresh activity in complex-problem-solving structures of volunteers’ brains.<sup>23</sup> Those with arthritis reported less pain, likely because of their increased physical activity, the research found, and those with diabetes needed less medication.<sup>24</sup> Yet another study found that after two years of participation, volunteers in 17 Experience Corps programs had fewer depressive symptoms and functional limitations than a control group.<sup>25</sup>**

**“The sense of purpose is real. That sense of making a difference, leaving a legacy, is absolutely palpable among the older adults that we serve,” says Lester Strong, vice president of Experience Corps and external affairs for the AARP Foundation. “Think about the intergenerational engagement—not only is the older adult helping the child, but the child is helping the older adult.”**

the longitudinal study found. Remarkably, this impact on survival was found to be greater than the advantage of low systolic blood pressure, low cholesterol, and lifestyle factors like smoking and exercise. “Self-perceptions had a greater impact on survival than gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness and functional health.”<sup>31</sup>

For context, the researchers noted that if a new virus was found to diminish life expectancy by seven years or more, “considerable effort would probably be devoted to identifying the cause and implementing a remedy.” Here, a likely cause is known: societally sanctioned denigration of the aged. “A comprehensive remedy requires that the denigrating views and actions directed at elderly targets undergo de-legitimization by the same society that has been generating them,” Levy and her colleagues concluded.

Ursula Staudinger, director of the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center, also notes the importance of attitudes, physical environments, and social institutions across the life span. Her work on aging shows that biology, behavior, and culture constantly interact to shape our development into old age.<sup>32</sup> The fact that millions of Americans 65 and older spend an average of 50 hours a week watching television raises concerns about how those stagnant hours might impact well-being.<sup>33</sup>

Is it surprising that some doctors support adding volunteer activity to the routine lifestyle recommendations for all patients?

These revelations should stir new and innovative approaches to enable purposeful aging. Viewed through a health lens, rapid population aging underscores a need for strategies to address well-being. Positive alternatives also are needed to counteract threats like obesity, diabetes, and poor lifestyle choices that may threaten the health gains made over the last century. We must also address the disparities that make healthy aging especially difficult for low-income communities.

In the face of these challenges, we have a chance to embrace a winning strategy to benefit aging individuals who are eager to give back as well as the broader society.

## Dollars and Sense

Economic factors, unsurprisingly, are frequently discussed concerns regarding the demographic shift. Population aging surely will strain financial and social resources in the coming years if later life centers on receiving services and supports but not giving back. There is no shortage of analysis of the potential funding chasm as the baby boom generation ages and draws on Medicare and other supports. But dependency is not the default that older people want.

Two-thirds of retirees say that retirement is the best time of life to give back—both financially and through volunteerism.<sup>34</sup> If the new “retirement” era supports a culture of contribution based on these sentiments, we can expect a flood of experience, wisdom, and skills to be channeled toward societal and individual challenges. The older population’s largesse already is apparent:

- The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that nearly a quarter of people 55 and older volunteer in their communities. About 21 million older adults contributed more than 3.3 billion hours of service in 2015, supporting food banks, fund-raising efforts, and nonprofits in need of professional assistance. The economic benefit of this service was valued at \$77 billion—money in the nation’s pocket.<sup>35</sup>
- Merrill Lynch and Age Wave find that retired people are the most generous segment of our population in charitable giving. They account for less than a third of the U.S. population over 25 but contribute 42 percent of charity dollars and nearly half of volunteer hours,<sup>36</sup> a trend that portends a boon for charity coffers as America ages.
- Charitable giving by those 65 and older, assuming that today’s rates persist, will balloon to \$6.6 trillion over the next two decades, Merrill Lynch and Age Wave project. When that is combined with the value of their volunteer hours, the nation is expected to see an \$8 trillion “longevity bonus.”<sup>37</sup>
- Older people also are part of the huge home-care force, whose work overall is valued by AARP at \$470 billion per year if translated to wages, surpassing U.S. spending on Medicaid.<sup>38</sup> Family caregiving is key to enabling older people to age at home and avoid vastly more expensive institutional care.

“How do we unleash the full power of this longevity bonus?” asks Ken Dychtwald, president and CEO of Age Wave. “How can we motivate new generations of retirees to put their time and resources to work for the causes they care about most? What would happen if the opportunity for older adults to give and volunteer were more accessible?”

## Working and Spending

Many people find purpose by remaining in the full- or part-time workforce, which can fill the generative urge while fueling the economy: Work keeps older people active in consumer markets and contributing to the tax base. Adults in the 21st century anticipate staying in the workforce longer than previous generations, some starting encore careers focused on both passion and purpose. People in their 50s and 60s already are launching businesses at nearly twice the rate of people in their 20s.<sup>39</sup>

Working is good for them, research tells us, and they don’t have to commit to a 9-to-5 routine to gain the benefits. In fact, many older people would like to continue working, but not with the long hours and at the pace of their younger years. Research offers them positive feedback. Even as few as 100 hours of work per year, paid or volunteer, can have a protective effect on older workers’ health, a longitudinal U.S. study suggests.<sup>40</sup> As well, older people who work or volunteer have been found in a Singapore study to have significantly higher cognitive performance, less depression, and higher overall mental well-being than non-workers, findings that point to the benefits of the social interaction and engagement involved in work and volunteerism, the researchers said.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, employers benefit from age-diverse workforces. Age-similar groups perform better at repetitive-task jobs, the research demonstrates, while age-diverse teams have the edge in problem-solving, idea generation, and productivity.<sup>42</sup>

## Economic Strength

In the broader financial landscape, Oxford Economics reports that the “longevity economy” is changing the face of America, with 106 million people over 50 responsible for at least \$7.6 trillion in annual economic activity. They spend \$4.6 trillion on consumer goods and services, including health care, according to Oxford’s calculations for an AARP report, “The Longevity Economy: Generating New Opportunities for Economic Growth and New Opportunities for

Business.” That figure rises to \$7.6 trillion when the effects of this direct spending circulate through the economy.

All this working, buying, and selling provides employment for nearly 100 million Americans, according to the report. In perspective, measuring this activity against nations listed by gross domestic product would find the U.S. longevity economy in third place, behind only the overall U.S. economy and China. Older people are expected to account for more than half of U.S. GDP by 2032.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, the McKinsey Global Institute identifies older consumers as one of the few growth engines in a sluggish global economy. People 60 and older will generate just over half of urban consumption growth in developed countries from 2015 to 2030, and 19 percent of global urban consumption growth, according to MGI’s 2016 report, “Urban World: The Global Consumers to Watch.”<sup>44</sup>

## Why Not Purpose?

These powerful facts that position older people as a national and global asset are just part of the evolving story of how purposeful aging can promote health, provide needed services and supports, fill charitable coffers, and, in the process, reap enormous economic benefit.

It remains an uphill trek, however, to change fundamental perceptions of aging and realize these benefits. We need to understand why programs that embrace the contributions of older people have not been widely emulated and scaled and why ageist attitudes are still entrenched.

How can we call attention to the evidence, spur culture change, and make the case for proactive programs and pathways? How can we encourage new directions and outlooks on what it means to age in the 21st century?

The clear and critical challenge around population aging is not the burgeoning size of this group, but the need to reframe our collective understanding. We seek creativity, insight, and leadership to catalyze models that integrate older adults into purpose-filled, cross-generational ways of life.

What is holding us back?





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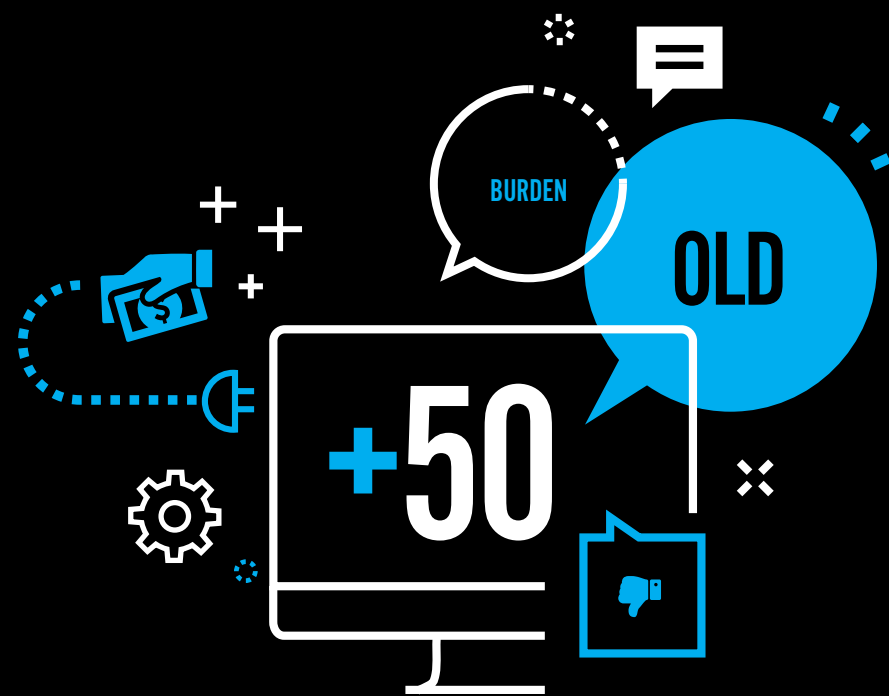
Today it is socially unacceptable to ignore, ridicule, or stereotype someone based on their gender, race, or sexual orientation. So why is it still acceptable to do this to people based on their age?... Ageism creates a negative reality of aging.

It's bad enough that ageism can influence public policy, employment practices, and how people are treated in society, but what's worse is that we accept the ageist behavior ourselves and start acting it out.

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**JO ANN JENKINS**

*Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age*



## MEDIA AND ADVERTISING: THE BIG DISCONNECT

People 50 and older hold 83 percent of U.S. household wealth, helping shore up the bottom lines of industries like financial services, motor vehicles, consumer durable and nondurable goods, health care, and utilities.

But the median age in the advertising and public relations industries is under 39 — part of the reason that unflattering stereotypes of older people persist.

Sources: Oxford Economics, Bureau of Labor Statistics.



PURPOSE IN ACTION



**HARRY BENNETT** | Experience Corps Tutor

Harry Bennett is an “Above and Beyond” Experience Corps awardee. The 70-year-old former engineer tutors second-graders at Furman Templeton School in Baltimore, Md., and stays after school to lend a hand to those who are struggling. A fixture at parent meetings and literacy activities, he also spearheads Science Club programs, leads fishing trips, and often dips into his own pocket to buy supplies for the children. Bennett also recruits other volunteers to go “above and beyond.” Three hundred volunteers in the Baltimore branch of AARP Foundation Experience Corps serve 5,800 students at a bargain cost of \$247 per student. | [aarp.org/experience-corps](http://aarp.org/experience-corps)

# CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

**In light of the evidence of the benefits of purposeful aging, John Gomperts, the president and CEO of America’s Promise Alliance, poses a key question. “It is curious that we remain where we are today when we have such powerful evidence of the benefits of purpose.”**

“We have successful programs and stories and examples that prove the point, as well as books and research that always cite purpose as crucial to successful aging. And yet we are where we are with a few programs that are profoundly subscale and with no apparent push for more of this.

“With the evidence as strong as it is, why has this not taken off in the way that one would expect?” Gomperts adds. “All that power hasn’t been converted to large-scale action yet. Something’s clearly in the way.”

Ageist attitudes are entrenched in business, social institutions, and popular culture. Older adults are all but invisible and marginalized in daily life. They are caricatured—or ignored—based on a wrinkled visage or slowing gait, whether in retail settings, medical facilities or their own workplaces, while attention centers on younger people who are presumed to be more able and alert and to have more important ideas and contributions to make.

Many employees who still have years of creativity and productivity to offer their companies and coworkers are forced or pressured out of jobs by ageist policies. These include mandatory retirement ages, sometimes as low as 60, that are a vestige of times when lives were much shorter.

One study of Facebook groups that focused on older people revealed that virtually all site descriptions used negative age stereotypes, and some even

advocated banning older people from public activities like shopping.<sup>45</sup> In the consumer world, a prominent misconception holds that older people can’t adapt to new technology, and that millennials and the emerging Generation Z—digital natives—should be tech’s target market. This view is blind to the older consumer’s proven and potential purchasing power. Businesses won’t profit by ignoring the fact that nearly 80 percent of U.S. aggregate net worth is held by people over 50.<sup>46</sup>

These are all symptoms of a society built around youth. Our culture is shaped by a history in which most lives were shorter, but as world populations age, culture should follow. Throughout our lives, culture cues us about when to learn, work, marry, have children, and retire, but the norms of yesterday persist.

As Catherine Collinson, president of Transamerica Institute and executive director of the Aegon Center for Longevity and Retirement, notes, humankind can be “its own worst enemy” when it comes to ensuring meaningful longer lives. “One of our greatest challenges will be overcoming biases about aging, including societal beliefs, employers’ perceptions, and personal attitudes,” she says.

Of course, the fate of youth is humankind’s future. Nothing is more important than the education, health, and prosperity of our young people. And older people are a key to elevating them. Enhancing the lives of older adults does not diminish investment in the young, nor does it pit one generation against the next. Instead, it recognizes the roles, value, and dignity of every phase of life, creating a cross-generational fabric of shared opportunity and possibility.

## **Yesterday’s Prism**

Why is there such a disconnect between the realities of 21st century aging and pervasive bias? The stubborn perceptions are informed by concepts rooted in a time when lives were little more than half as long as they are today. The lag is visible in many ways, from physical environments built for young people to medicine’s focus on acute diseases, which were the prominent illnesses of a half-century ago, while we still lack adequate solutions for the chronic ailments that plague the new longevity.



## AN INTERGENERATIONAL REVOLUTION By Marc Freedman

For half a century, we've been sold the idea of later life as second youth—a time for leisure, often lived out in age-graded playgrounds. This model represents a departure from centuries of human experience. As the first generation likely to live decades beyond the traditional “golden years,” we are at a turning point, on the brink of a social revolution that will create new models for later life and intergenerational collaboration.

The plain truth is we've gotten the generational issue exactly wrong. Older people shouldn't self-segregate in age-restricted communities. Instead, we should be there for the people who actually are young. They are our future, and older adults have the life experience, wisdom, and empathy to support them. So instead of generational warfare, I expect to see a flowering of cross-generational collaboration—and the harnessing of the nation's greatest natural human resource, experienced adults who want to be the grown-ups they themselves counted on when they were young.

This longing is grounded in human nature. The drive to invest in younger people grows with the passage of time. Erik Erikson said the hallmark of successful development in this stage of life could be encapsulated in the phrase “I am what survives of me.” When more years are behind us than ahead, we understand, at a fundamental level, that human beings are designed to pass on essential truths from generation to generation. Simply put, “biology flows downhill” from older to younger, as a river runs toward the sea, according to George Vaillant, a human development expert at Harvard Medical School. We must cease fighting (human) nature and instead, channel it—to make the world a more just place and to improve prospects for future generations.

But it's not enough for biology to flow downhill. Society must do so as well. The challenge now is to transform this potential into practice and to extend generativity beyond family structures and into communities, to bridge age, class, and race. This call must be met with an expansion of opportunity and innovation—from service efforts through second acts focused on education and related work—that will transform desire into concrete action.

We have rerouted the river of life, squandering the opportunity for older and younger people to connect in mutually beneficial and nurturing ways. Now is the time to return that river to its natural course. This revolution can restore life's natural order and create a new model for the post-midlife period that embraces the spirit of purpose and legacy—a new way of living.

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People generally don't respond to data. The role of narrative is critical. The narrative must be based on credible research, evidence, and analysis. Yes, we need stories about the benefits of purposeful aging, but we also need more facts and confirmatory analysis.

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JOHN WHYTE

Our outmoded ideas fail to recognize that “old age” has changed, that people aren't just living longer—they view and live life differently. They seek new possibilities. Retirement expectations are unlike those of earlier generations. Few now aspire to collect the fancy watch, then idle away the rest of their days. Older adults are increasingly likely to work during traditional retirement years, motivated by financial need or a desire to be useful and meaningfully engaged. Half of boomers surveyed told researchers they would even continue working if they won the lottery.<sup>47</sup> Many want to volunteer or take up new physical and mental challenges, and many help to raise grandchildren.

As early as 1998, the first AARP “Baby Boomers Envision Retirement” survey found that this generation “never seemed to associate retirement with sitting on

the front porch.” Just 16 percent said they preferred to retire from work completely.<sup>48</sup> Yet, as they have aged, boomers are still tarred with a tired image that belies their aspirations.

Media and advertising reinforce attitudes that blind people to the modern aging profile. They not only glorify youth but perpetuate narrow and often unflattering portrayals of older people—branding that far overshadows positive messages. Instead of cultivating ideas about human potential in later life, we are peppered with imagery about the problems of age, especially end-of-life decline and its economic costs.

Certainly, we must recognize that aging comes with its share of challenges. But the very categories of products geared to the needs of older adults inadvertently

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Never-grow-up and never-grow-old are codes that are deeply rooted and entrenched in our culture and brains. Those codes in advertising and media are practically laws, in the sense that the cult of the young is so pervasive. The stigma is deep, embedded and internalized.

The biggest disservice is the use of older people as the target of humor in advertising and media. They are routinely portrayed in patronizing ways. When we see them display passion and emotion, it's predictable and stereotyped. It's about family or grandchildren. It's about decline, loneliness, health problems, or sex. Older people are as multidimensional as any other group in our society. We need to show the multidimensionality of their passion.

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SUSAN GIANINNO



feed negative stereotypes because they routinely address pain and decline in the form of chronic conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, digestive troubles, and more. Such products respond to marketplace demand, to be sure, but largely missing is aspirational advertising or imagery depicting older adults with passion, complexity, or purpose. They work, travel, dine, and dress; they learn and are culturally engaged; they seek experience and entertainment. Yet the images of disease and deterioration prevail.

#### **The Dawn of Awareness**

The cult of youth continues as an unwritten code, honored almost universally in media and advertising. Supple skin and taut muscles shine and glow. Wrinkles and silver hair are to be hidden away. Given those parameters, it's no surprise that fewer than a third of firms polled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, a sister organization to the *Economist* magazine, take

increased longevity into account in their sales and marketing efforts.<sup>49</sup>

“The problem is a total absence of imagination,” says Joseph Coughlin, director of the MIT AgeLab. “Marketers still present these years as filled with golf, cruises, and a rocking chair. But the attitudes of the ‘new’ old and emerging technology will transform how we think of aging. Technology will enable us not just to live longer, but to live better by extending our work and play lives, inventing entirely new activities in what we call older age, and by creating new markets for products, services, and experiences that excite and delight across the lifespan.”

Some companies and their advertising arms are exploring ways to reach the older-consumer market, but efforts tend to be clumsy, not unlike the lumbering attempts to debunk stereotypes that occurred in the



## JOINING TOGETHER FOR TRANSFORMATION By Kimon Sargeant

**Demography may be destiny, but it's also opportunity. Longer and healthier lives for many in America and around the world bring the opportunity to explore new passions and purposes in a new stage of life. To increase the visibility and impact of these explorations, the John Templeton Foundation has supported the Purpose Prize for people 60 and over who devote their "retirement years" to creating programs for social good. The inspiring prize recipients represent the leading edge of what's possible if millions more older adults could similarly invest their time and talents. For such broad-scale social transformation, we need to build more "on-ramps" to encore careers—and we need as many builders as possible. These could include options ranging from encore fellowships at Fortune 500 companies and individual purpose accounts that enable preretirement savings for transitions to a Peace Corps model for older adults.**

**Philanthropy will be a key partner in this life-stage transformation, offering the freedom to test new ideas, back long-shot bets, and promote innovation. The growing philanthropic sector has plenty of room to be a catalyst for new approaches that take full advantage of what Paul Irving has called the "upside of aging." By experimenting with new approaches, expanding novel programs, and increasing awareness of how encore careers don't just benefit older adults but also increase the greater good, philanthropy can target the gap between how purposeful older adults want to spend their longer, healthier lives and what current policies, programs, and institutions accommodate.**

1960s and 1970s as marketers adapted to changing roles and attitudes about women. The image of octogenarian actor Betty White on a football field in a Snickers ad, for example, was entertaining but replaced one cliché with another. And when Bridgestone promoted a new line of golf clubs as appropriate for pensioners, sales were poor.<sup>50</sup>

As one marketing firm warned, older adults do not long to be twentysomethings again. They want to see reflections of their current, not their younger, selves. They appreciate their own age and experience and wish to make the most of today.<sup>51</sup>

### **Cross-Generational Bias**

It's not only the young who, consciously or unconsciously, diminish the older population. Negative portrayals build upon age stereotypes that people internalize throughout their lives. By the time they move past midlife, many are steeped in this mythology. According to stereotype embodiment theory<sup>52</sup> and the research that supports it by Becca Levy and her colleagues, ageism in media and marketing is often absorbed in childhood. So when people reach or pass through middle age, they may be already infected by cultural disdain toward their own demographic and limit themselves with low perceptions of self-worth. Indeed, these flawed self-definitions may impede their own well-being and health. Fortunately, Levy's research also has found that those exposed to more positive images of aging can draw on those beliefs later in life and reap the benefits of a greater sense of purpose and better health.<sup>53</sup>

Because pervasive ageism can be entrenched on a subconscious level, it is implicitly accepted. While society's ethical barriers reject prejudice based on gender, race, or sexual orientation, ageism carries no stigma.<sup>54</sup> Nor does personal experience necessarily affect the prejudice. Nursing home staff, for example, have been found to use baby talk with residents who are in good physical or cognitive health.<sup>55</sup> Even when young people encounter a successful older co-worker, they tend to categorize the person as an exception to the norm because age and productivity do not go together in their boilerplate assumptions.<sup>56</sup>

Bombarded with an information-age glut of imagery and words, we lack positive, potent messages that drive home the reality of 21st-century aging. Information about older adults and purposeful living abounds, but its delivery has lacked the power to incite awareness or understanding of the issues, let alone urgency for change. Negative portrayals have long filled the void. We lack compelling storylines and effective storytelling, based on facts, that can cut through the information onslaught to provoke disruptive, large-scale transformation.

### **Looking Through You**

The opportunities created by our new longevity are rarely part of public conversation. Election years come and go, candidates rise and fall, and campaigns fill our TV screens with fear and promise, all with barely a sound bite about how the nation should deal with the demographic shift.

Leaders use their bully pulpits to champion causes and groups—they always have. The power of political leadership and the magnetic pull of celebrity activism, for example, have rallied people around everything from the dangers of climate change to the merits of physical fitness. Where are the champions of purposeful aging?

Prominent organizations could elevate the contributions of older adults. The National Institutes of Health makes important scientific discoveries thanks to the insight and know-how of its many older researchers. It admirably recruits people over age 50 and provides benefits and a work environment aimed at retaining them.<sup>57</sup> The program is no secret—AARP has cited NIH as the best employer for older workers—but the general public is mostly unaware of the contributions of these scientists who would be considered over the hill by ageist standards.

AARP, the best-known champion of older people, has a decades-long history of trying to turn these trends around, leading campaigns for issues of concern to older Americans. Jo Ann Jenkins, its CEO, has made the disruption of aging her rallying cry. Yet we still lack a broadly recognized, high-level narrative about aging and how to maximize its society-wide contributions.

Jenkins writes in her 2016 book *Disrupt Aging*: “We all have a responsibility, young and old, to speak out against ageism, to become aware of how our ageist attitudes and perceptions work their way into our behaviors and our language and to stop making jokes that subtly and unintentionally promote ageism.”

### The Chance to Help

An Encore.org survey found that 87 percent of older Americans felt a responsibility to help those in need, and seven in 10 said that it was important to leave the world a better place.<sup>58</sup> What too often is missing is a pathway, a request, a welcome mat—an appreciation of what they offer. Even when they want to give back, to find purpose, their motivation is not enough. Organizations of all kinds fail to provide opportunity, either overtly or by omission.

It’s not just a workplace problem, but one that affects the service community as well. Linda Fried recounts that when she was a young geriatrician in Baltimore, her older patients were more than willing when she prescribed what we now call purposeful activity as a way to improve their physical health and mental outlook. She told them to find “something meaningful to do.” The patients tried to take their doctor’s advice but had trouble finding work, paid or volunteer, to use their capabilities. “They couldn’t find anybody who would take them,” Fried says. “What a waste of people with a lifetime of experience.”<sup>59</sup>

It is equally important that organizations respect and make use of older individuals’ assets instead of relegating them to random tasks that can quash motivation. Older people too often find that volunteer roles do not match their skills, aspirations, or rich experience. They are dismissed as impaired or slow, assigned to one-size-fits-all duties that not only can disincentivize volunteerism but undercut the sense of purpose that successful programs impart.

To be sure, older people do provide important community service in many realms of volunteering. The federal Senior Corps program, for example, involves nearly 270,000 volunteers age 55 and older in three impactful programs: Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and RSVP.<sup>60</sup> The participants assisted 840,000 elderly people in 2015, helping them remain independent in their homes, and tutored and mentored more than 267,000 young people.<sup>61</sup>

“I cannot count how many Senior Corps Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and RSVP volunteers have told me, ‘I don’t know what I would do but for this program. This service gives me a purpose in life,’ ” says Wendy Spencer, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that administers Senior Corps and has published research about the health benefits of volunteering.

Yet the program is modest in the context of the millions of older adults who are moving on from primary careers and looking for meaningful endeavors, and it has ample capacity for many more participants. “We have a lot of demand for Senior Corps volunteers,” Spencer says. “Whether it is schools, volunteer centers, or other community groups, they all know the experience and insight older Americans bring to problem solving is a valuable part of any effective strategy.”

Research confirms that people would get involved if they felt needed and included. Among adults over 44, nearly seven in 10 who do not volunteer report that they have not been asked to serve. If personally asked to do so, more than eight in 10 said they would agree, according to the AARP report “More to Give.”<sup>62</sup> A more open attitude that embraces their talents could make the difference. But for that to happen, our eyes as a society must be opened to recognize their merit, and pathways must be built and spread to facilitate their involvement.



## THE PHILANTHROPIC PARADOX By John Feather

**Living a later life with purpose is what we all desire, but we as a society need to do better at providing encouragement and opportunities for older persons who want to stay engaged in their communities. Although philanthropy has a role to play in these efforts, support for programs in aging represents less than 2 percent of charitable giving, a number that has not grown in 20 years even as the percentage of Americans over 65 has doubled.**

**It may seem logical that philanthropists of all ages would embrace the opportunities inherent in all aspects of population aging, but we seem to be stuck. We need to recognize that there is much room for aging-focused philanthropy, that we can change countless lives by supporting programs and organizations that foster purposeful aging. Health-care costs and caregiving needs will only grow; retirement norms leave many people financially and mentally adrift; and the world’s many problems need the engagement and experience of older people.**

**Donors may fear their contributions can’t make a difference in such a broad arena. But older people are one of our greatest resources, and providing them opportunities for living with purpose is a win-win situation for everyone. Philanthropic leadership can emphasize the urgency and help catalyze wider efforts to foster purpose. It can set the standard and, in the process, propel a dramatic societal change to redefine aging. Philanthropy can take the lead in creating new attitudes and elevating purpose as a goal that all should pursue.**

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I cannot count how many Senior Corps Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and RSVP volunteers have told me, ‘I don’t know what I would do but for this program. This service gives me a purpose in life.’

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WENDY SPENCER



PURPOSE IN ACTION



**GRANDMA VIRGINIA MCLAURIN** | Foster Grandparent

At 107, Grandma Virginia McLaurin works an average of 30 hours a week at Roots Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. She receives a Foster Grandparents stipend of \$2.65 an hour to help students with reading, social skills, and special needs. The cost to taxpayers is around \$3,800 a year—a small price to reap the services she provides to the children. McLaurin is one of 23,000 Foster Grandparents who serve more than 189,000 young people across the country through this federal Corporation for National and Community Service program. | [nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps](https://nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps)





# COMMUNICATE, CONVINCE, CONNECT

**While the Purposeful Aging Summit recognized many activities and organizations that make vital contributions to the cause, the assembled experts agreed that without broader frameworks and scaled-up efforts to change attitudes and open doors, we risk wasting a unique, immense resource.**

The concept of the older generation as a positive force is emerging, but far too slowly. We see important advances like the age-friendly cities movement, university research on modern aging, encore career efforts, and the once-a-decade White House Conference on Aging. At that event, in 2015, President Obama proclaimed that “arguably the toughest justice on the Supreme Court also happens to be the oldest—Ruth Bader Ginsburg, also known as the Notorious RBG.”

But the World Health Organization highlighted the work yet to be done when it called on nations to reject stereotypes that depict older adults as frail and dependent creatures. Its sweeping “World Report on Ageing and Health,” published in 2015, emphasized that recognition of their potential can produce valuable social and economic returns. It urged new policies that facilitate engagement by older people, and underscored the importance of resolving inequities that can undermine health.<sup>63</sup>

Such policy progress is vital if purposeful living is to become the norm, as is evolution in the corporate and nonprofit arenas. In addition, however, to be truly disruptive—in a time frame that acknowledges the pace of global aging—the culture at large must reject deeply held, outdated prejudices about mature populations.

## **A Movement for the Age**

Building a culture of support for 100-year lives, which may soon be the norm, requires a broad movement. Data and logic already tell us that purposeful aging is a plus for the world. The research on volunteerism alone would seem to flag such engagement as a health priority and opportunity. Yet emotion continues to overshadow what we know to be true. Ai-jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and co-director of Caring Across Generations, puts it like this:

“Our emotional life shapes so much of how we live—and can often overshadow what the mind is saying. We are seeking to write the story of who we are and who we are becoming as a country, a story that has different layers; it’s fundamentally an emotional project. Our entry point is how we talk about the new way of being, in the context of living longer. We must shift the narrative from fear and denial to an embrace of aging, move from a back-to-youth or regression orientation to a purposeful new way of being, and move from older people being a burden to being an asset to society as a whole.

“Unfortunately, any question related to aging is usually associated with a problem of decay. If we can shift the underlying feeling associated with aging to one of evolution and our growth as humanity—that will give us a different kind of energy and momentum to tackle the challenges associated with aging, and develop the types of solutions that will enable us to realize the true potential of longevity.”

This culture change is not just about social norms and behavior, but also science and technology, government policy, business practices, education, and the built environment—all of this and more must elevate the goal of purposeful aging. It can seem daunting—even paralyzing—to create this narrative and bridge the complex realities of aging, the policy world, and cultural and institutional prejudices. But there are steps we can take now to begin the journey.

## **A Realistic Mirror**

No aspect of the challenge is as crucial as reorienting public perception, and here media influencers across the board can play a powerful role. Without doubt, the

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A story well told can change the world, and media can play a critical role in elevating purposeful aging through effective storytelling. Stories create awareness, inspire personal action, and promote system-level change. By developing and spreading a new narrative about the potential for older adults to contribute to a better world, we can change attitudes and, ultimately, culture.

”

DAVID LINDE

quest to reframe aging requires new messaging—in TV and film, marketing and advertising, news and social media—that reflects the true characteristics of the older generation. Imagery and themes must express who we are, who we are becoming, and who we can be—with the goal of embracing a valued and productive mature population.

This campaign calls for new storylines that reflect the aspirations and abilities of today’s older adult, in effect “normalizing” this population. Media portrayals must transcend age as the principal defining characteristic. The 21st century older adult is not a one-dimensional

character who exists only as a grandparent, by turns loving and clueless, who suffers aches and pains, crankiness and forgetfulness. Older people are as diverse and multilayered as the rest of humanity.

Mass media, including Internet media, have a broad canvas on which to portray the passions and purpose that reflect aging in the new millennium, whether depicting an ebullient, septuagenarian Tina Turner on the cover of *Vogue*, Paul McCartney on tour at well over 64, Bill Gates leading his foundation after leading Microsoft, or Jimmy Carter with his post-presidential philanthropy.



Judi Dench’s character in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* illustrates that older adults can embrace change and reinvent their lives, as well as develop mutually beneficial bonds with young people.

Entertainment media hold tremendous power to foster realistic views of aging. Film roles for older adults that model purposeful aging, like Judi Dench's character in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and Robert De Niro in *The Intern*, are shifting images from the clichéd, grizzled rivals played by Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon in 1993's *Grumpy Old Men*. The Netflix Web TV dramedy *Grace and Frankie* also entertainingly captures the complexity of older people's lives. It's a beginning, but only that. So much more can be done.

It's time for normalization that refocuses not just superficial views of aging, but deeper perceptions. We need realistic viewpoints that shift away from fear, denial, and stereotyping to an embrace of extended longevity; away from dreams of recapturing youth to goals of aging purposefully; and away from seeing older people as a burden to recognizing that they are an asset. Balanced portrayals must reflect the nuances, challenges, and rewards of all life stages. The new direction, simply put, replaces the notion that age is a problem with an appreciation that age brings opportunity.

"We need a frame for new aspirations for aging," states Susan Gianinno, chairman for North America of Publicis Worldwide. "Whether it's aging boldly, innovatively, and passionately—or aging purposefully—we need to reframe the aspiration as well as the images to reflect today's realities."

#### Madison Avenue Wake-Up Call

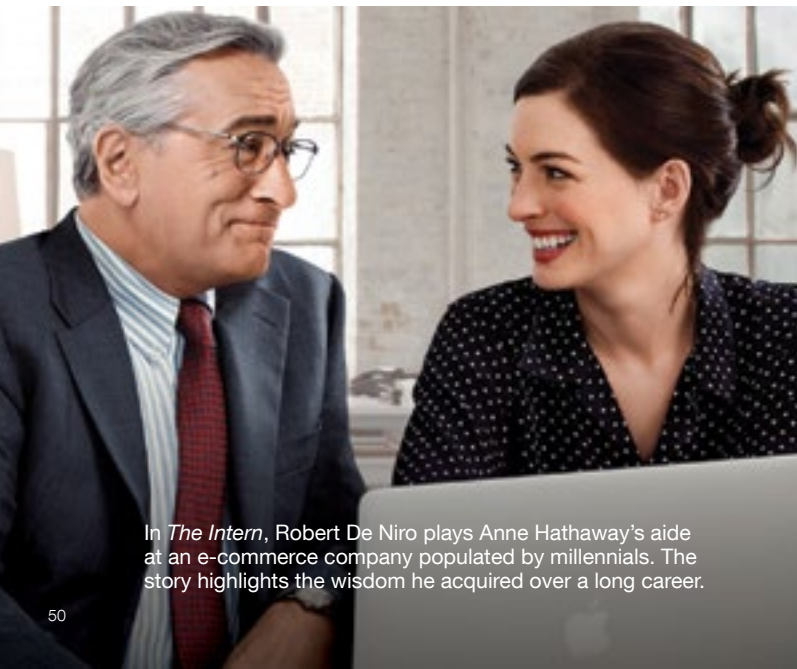
Advertising and marketing can fuel solutions. For decades, this sector has reinforced ageist typecasts

and created new ones. As mirrors and shapers of culture and opinion, as experts in the power of ideas, this profession can drive constructive change. Enlightened industry leaders should push for new approaches to counter misperceptions about what it means to age. They can overtly challenge bias, as Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign did with positive images of women who do not conform to the model-beauty stereotypes that have been sold to Americans for decades. More recently, the company launched its "My Beauty My Say" campaign, featuring women who celebrate their uniqueness instead of surrendering to narrow definitions of good looks.

Pfizer's bold "Get Old" conversation-starter campaign has encouraged fresh perceptions by portraying, among other images, a fiftysomething couple on a "first date," an older man as a college freshman, and a couple in their 60s looking for their "starter home." The fact that such imagery is startling instead of unremarkable tells us how far we have to go to normalize older people in the public mind.

Instead of making them the target of biting humor that betrays their complexity and exaggerates their limitations, we need to see older adults' passions and talents. In addition to products that address the aches and pains of age, offerings should be positioned as useful, perhaps to both old and young, without reinforcing age bias.

Although not focused on consumer products, AARP's "Real Possibilities" campaign is instructive for its upbeat encouragement of new directions in later



In *The Intern*, Robert De Niro plays Anne Hathaway's aide at an e-commerce company populated by millennials. The story highlights the wisdom he acquired over a long career.



After their marriages collapse, the characters played by Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin become unlikely friends in *Grace and Frankie*, sharing the joys and challenges of later life.

“

Marketers' views about older adults are evolving. And that evolution must move faster. The same talents that create demand for new products and services can be an influential force in changing ideas about the potential of older adults. Of course, changing culture is harder than selling cereal, but it's a challenge that my marketing colleagues can take on to change lives for the better.

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JOHN ZWEIG

“

When media is at its best, it educates, informs, and inspires; it opens hearts and minds to new possibilities. In our society, older individuals are sometimes forgotten and often underappreciated. By exploring new ideas, and through storytelling, we can change views about the roles and value of older adults and celebrate the potential of purposeful aging.

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PAULA KERGER

life, applauding people who are unconstrained by conventional views of age and seek deeper levels of connection and empowerment. Based on the idea that mature adults don't want to be defined or limited by chronology, the campaign posits that possibilities for financial security, health, meaningful work and purpose, discovery and romance are ageless. Businesses could attract customers by incorporating these kinds of messages into marketing.

#### The Business Rationale

Clearly, the business world stands to gain by tapping into the older generation's purchasing power. Oxford Economics' research shows that as a group, the over-50s control almost 80 percent of aggregate net worth in the United States and are responsible for a

disproportionate amount of consumer spending.<sup>64</sup> The advertising industry is starting to take note of this market power and is in the discovery phase of engaging and reflecting the older consumer.

In targeting this demographic, marketers have an incentive to promote purposeful lives rather than depicting aging as a burden. Shopping, for example, can be a social and leisure experience, and proximity tends to be a primary factor in older consumers' choice of stores. Options that cater to these desires would benefit both buyers and sellers. People over 60 seek quality, are loyal to brands, and perhaps surprisingly are not particularly price-sensitive—even if their incomes are below average levels, according to an international study by consulting firm A.T. Kearney.<sup>65</sup>



### A PURPOSEFUL POST-CAREER By Donald Miller

**Images of sitting on the beach or playing golf may seem enticing, but many of us see the leisure-based notion of retirement as empty and unfulfilling. It simply doesn't fit with the reality that we may live another 30 years after our formal work lives end. Even for those taking a post-retirement sabbatical year, the “meaning” question arises starkly, especially if one is healthy. People ask themselves: What am I going to do for the rest of my life? Might I have an encore career? Can the talents that I cultivated in 40 years of working life be applied to the volunteer sector or in developing a program or idea that will make this a better world? How will I find purpose?**

**We are on the cusp of a new movement, led by the baby boom generation, that takes on these questions. Our generation will counter the image of “old age” as one of decline and transform it into a stage of opportunity that will connect us with the idealism of the 1960s and '70s.**

**At 70 years of age, I see this pattern in my own “encore” life. Anticipating the beginning of a new decade, I remained in academia but decided to give up tenure to pursue new opportunities and passions. I continue my research at USC, but largely from a home office that eliminates a two-hour daily commute. I wake up every morning with a spirit of gratitude rather than pressure, with time to reflect on life, write in my journal, swim daily and spend time with my grandchildren. Like many people my age, I look forward to the next stage of life as an enticing, purposeful possibility.**



As older adults, we can be passionate advocates. We're the generation that marched for civil rights, that drove the women's movement, that advocated for LGBT rights. And now we can redefine aging. I don't think it's going to be easy. We have a long way to go, but we've made progress, and I think we're at a tipping point where this emerging view about the potential of older adults is going to spread.



**SHERRY LANSING**

### **Reaching the Audience**

Even powerful messages can be diluted by weak communication. Clarity, and the ability to convey the potential of aging in concise, memorable ways, is key. Why do we immediately think of Nike when we hear the slogan "Just Do It"? Or Apple products when we hear, "Think Different"? "Breakfast of Champions" can only be Wheaties. Timeless marketing phrases transcend expositions of the merits of shoes, computers, and cereal, and inspirational notes stir social movements.

There is no more powerful rallying cry than the one that energized the drive for civil rights. The refrain "We Shall Overcome," from a song with field-worker and spiritual roots, came to symbolize, sustain, and unify a determined movement, rising from the lips of activist leaders to will itself into a landmark voting-rights speech by President Lyndon Johnson. "Si Se Puede" has been an integral part of Latino social movements since Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers propelled it. And when Nancy Reagan launched her antidrug campaign from the bully pulpit of the First Lady's office, the slogan "Just Say No" became synonymous with the cause.

To cut through timeworn prejudices, the purposeful aging movement needs similarly evocative, laser-focused language. Power lies in the truth behind memorable slogans, but though there is a story to "sell" about purposeful aging, simply laying out the evidence falls short of capturing the public's attention in today's reality-show world, especially when it runs counter to ingrained typecasts. The power of purpose must be conveyed in compelling ways that can slice through the daily information barrage and define a new identity for older adults.

### **It's About All of Us**

Embedded in the message is the larger public interest. It wasn't until smoking was reframed to highlight the dangers of secondhand smoke that the health threat to children, the elderly, and everyone else invigorated tobacco-control efforts. And when white Americans began to recognize the racial injustice that still infected our nation a century after the Civil War, the civil rights movement expanded into a multiracial coalition that altered public opinion.

Young people may not prioritize aging concerns, but they have older relatives and friends as well as futures of their own. Well-designed messages can help them understand how purposeful aging benefits all ages.

Precisely because of its intergenerational benefits and wide societal impact, purposeful aging is positioned to expand its constituency across generations.

Government has an important role to play, including through existing initiatives like the \$202-million-a-year Senior Corps, which could be scaled up through partnerships and greater funding to meet a proven demand. Many local communities already are voicing enthusiasm for its services. So far, 300 communities nationwide are investing more than \$30 million in Senior Corps' local Foster Grandparent programs, including Syracuse, N.Y., which is quadrupling the number of Foster Grandparents in area schools. In Minneapolis, the UCare Foundation and local hospitals are expanding another Senior Corps program, Senior Companions, by funding additional companions to help older people live independently in their homes, in the process reducing hospital admissions and use of emergency services.

Millions more Americans should be encouraged and welcomed to join such impactful programs, including the Peace Corps, which provides international service options for older Americans. However, its ranks include only a small percentage of over-50 volunteers. Another proven initiative is AARP Experience Corps. Now operating in 26 cities, the program's 2,200 older tutors serve more than 31,000 children.

These service opportunities offer potent examples of how our aging human capital can change lives. Funding to support such efforts should be increased. Scaling and spreading them will require intergenerational partnership supported by movement building, media, and the determination of leaders in policy, health, business, philanthropy, academia, and other domains.

Nora Super, chief of programs and services for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, was executive director of the 2015 White House Conference on Aging. In that role, she traveled the country, visiting communities large and small, and talked with people from all walks of life. Super says she became more convinced than ever that "older adults want to contribute meaningfully, to participate actively in their communities, to add value throughout their lives. They need and deserve the opportunity to age with purpose, and it's very clear that we need their talents, wisdom, and experience to strengthen our communities and our country."



### Leadership for the 21st Century

The role of political leadership is crucial to the purposeful aging movement. Officeholders must be held accountable for how they address demographic challenges and opportunities. Population aging is just one issue, but it is one that affects every aspect of our lives. Yet it has received precious little attention amid the stew of divisive issues that devour government time and resources.

In lieu of discussions that begin and end with entitlement programs, we need a much broader focus. “Leaders should consider population aging when weighing other issues,” advises Pinchas Cohen, dean of the Leonard Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California. “After all, it will impact every economic and social sector, from health care and immigration to education, housing, and technology.”

Politicians should be urged to spread both realistic and aspirational narratives about aging, while pursuing inclusive policies that enable older people to contribute more of their talents:

- A federal-level office, council, or agency on aging, with adequate budget, could highlight the issue’s importance. The White House also could galvanize other government agencies to prioritize aging in the

course of their work. Among many precedents, First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let Girls Learn crusade drew attention to the educational discrimination against girls around the world and informed the operations of the State Department and other agencies.

- As suggested by Encore.org, a presidential executive order could instruct agencies to identify federal programs that could enable older adults to serve youth. The organization has outlined an initiative to mobilize older Americans to help young people at risk, including advocating public and private funding for an “encore service year.” “We can provide a windfall of support for young people and create sustainable societies that make the most of the great gift of longer lives,” reads Encore.org’s report, “An Encore of Service: Experienced Adults Helping Vulnerable Youth.”<sup>66</sup>
- Congress and the president should consider enhancements to retirement mechanisms, including individual purpose accounts and similar ideas, to encourage savings for service in later life.
- State and local leaders should accelerate innovation to enable civic, business and service activities by older adults. From educational programs to transportation assistance and networked neighborhoods,

regional leaders can make pathways to community engagement and productivity inviting and accessible.

Henry Cisneros, the former U.S. Housing and Urban Development secretary and mayor of San Antonio, Texas, urges political leaders to step up. “We all have encountered the large and small challenges that are tied to the aging of the population. We need to work harder at understanding those issues and pursuing solutions to ensure a vital, engaged older generation.” In his public roles, Cisneros recalls, “I was struck by the determination of older people to live with dignity and independence and to give back to their communities. As elected officials, we need to maximize possibilities for them to do so. If we have respect for their wisdom and abilities, and we marshal their talents, we will build a stronger nation for years to come.”

### Campaign Seasons

Political campaigns deliver prime opportunities for activism as candidates develop their platforms, court voters, and appear in the media. Campaigns expose differences, but they also offer a chance to shift directions, reaffirm beliefs, and explore solutions. Among the issues candidates should be asked to discuss are those relevant to our changing demography:

- Combating institutional and cultural ageism
- Retraining older workers, publicizing the value they bring to the workforce, and incentivizing employers to hire them
- Creative ways to take advantage of the talents and generativity of older people
- Support for both paid and unpaid caregivers who help older adults remain in their homes
- Promoting age-friendly communities, housing, transportation, and infrastructure
- Encouragement of purpose in later life, including policy ideas such as gap years in which older people take up meaningful activities or expanded service programs

Michael Hodin, CEO of the Global Coalition on Aging, notes that “a century’s worth of tradition will need to be reinvented and reframed, particularly around public policy, which continues to be mired in the 20th century culture that presumes ‘old’ is largely victimhood and

need. Policymakers need to craft a framework that recognizes population aging as the cross-generational megatrend that it is.”

### Teaming Up

Beyond the catalytic role of government, politicians, and policy, the Purposeful Aging Summit underscored the point that all sectors must invest in efforts to ensure a different future of aging. Participants recognized that growing and democratizing this movement requires opening organizational silos. Civil society, faith communities, government, and business can cross-pollinate and collaborate on purposeful aging while furthering their own missions in the process. Among the settings where such alliances can be created:

**Businesses.** In addition to transforming marketing efforts to reflect realistic aspirations for aging, businesses have a natural role to play through encore-career training and transition programs that highlight generativity. They can incorporate flexible scheduling for older people who remain vital contributors but may not want to work as many hours as when they were young. Companies can adopt the World Economic Forum’s age-friendly business principles and improve training and opportunity for multigenerational workforces. Creative programs like purposeful “gap years” and Intel Corp.’s encore fellowships for retirement-eligible employees hold great promise.

**Educational institutions.** They can encourage purpose through lifelong learning and midlife programs, such as those flourishing at Harvard and Stanford, that foster reinvention and redirection. “These programs suggest that higher education should seek ways to embrace and foster opportunities for midlife renewal that serve the needs of individuals, their communities, and alumni, as well as our nation and world,” says Philip Pizzo, founding director of the Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute.

### Charitable, Nonprofit, and Faith Organizations.

Supporting purposeful lives, many already involve older volunteers, and they are logical places to harness the affinity between young and old. Rabbi Laura Geller’s Southern California-based Temple Emanuel, as an example, hosts group conversations about hopes, concerns, and ways to make later life meaningful and productive. And Encore.org has launched Generation to Generation, a social action campaign mobilizing older adults to help young people thrive.

## CONCLUSION

### A positive sign?

It should at least be noted that during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, with its many overshadowing concerns, age seemed a virtual nonissue for Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders, despite the fact that each was at a life stage that had sparked the “too old?” question about candidates in past campaigns. While the topic clearly did not carry the weight of other issues that dominated an extraordinary election cycle, it is impossible to know whether the unorthodoxy of the race simply left no room for questions about age, or if this was evidence of a cultural shift. Hindsight may provide the answer. Whichever is the case, we know that aging adults increasingly seek and are prepared for purposeful roles, in politics and every other endeavor.

In an era of too much distrust and dysfunction, the understanding and empathy that come with age could cultivate a very different landscape. It is not hard to imagine ways that older adults—with their great numbers and their stability, knowledge, and experience—could beneficially transform societies by mentoring, creating companies and organizations, serving young people and one another, and tackling a range of sweeping problems that confront the United States and the world.

It's time to accelerate efforts that enable older adults to serve and contribute, and to shift public consciousness in recognition of their merit. It's time to infuse them with self-perceptions that reflect this value. It's time to extend the benefits of generativity to communities everywhere. It's time to mobilize and marshal the talents of older adults for the good of all.



Each of us has an opportunity to contribute to a purposeful aging movement that is still emerging. One day, we will look back and tell others how we worked to change the future. Now is the time to become involved, to speak out, and to act.



PAUL IRVING

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A major purpose of life is living a life of purpose. A vision held clearly in mind and the courage to venture forth pave the way for many a success. If nothing is ventured, nothing is gained.



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