

## EXPLORING THE CULTURAL WISDOM OF OUR ELDERS

Notes from VAN September Forum, 10 a.m. to noon, September 14, 2004  
Discussion Session held at the Hamline-Midway Library, St. Paul, MN

### “ELDERHOOD”

#### Introductions, led by Maricarmen Cortes, Wilder Foundation

Maricarmen Cortes introduced herself and said that she was pleased and honored to have the opportunity to facilitate this conversation. She has been in Minnesota for 4 years, has found an amazing variety of activities for elders, and has seen how active they are in the community. Coming from Chile, she perceives Minnesota as a special place, different from the rest of the United States. She sees that Minnesotans are more educated and respectful. She sees that people have a greater sense of the common good that is exuded in their everyday activities and social involvement.

This forum has brought people from different cultures together to discuss their different perceptions about: 1) what “elderhood” means, and 2) how we can embrace the experience and wisdom of elders from different ethnic backgrounds to benefit the quality of life in our communities. Maricarmen invited the group to focus on the assets and similarities in “elderhood” across cultures, thereby developing the mutual respect and trust that will facilitate the sharing of strengths. Trust will allow us to see the differences across cultures and together work on how to overcome them and work better with older adults.

Maricarmen asked the participants to introduce themselves and share one thing they value most about elders and one thing that has been surprising in their integration to the American way of life. This activity took up much of the session for participants had a lot to share and learn from each other. Here are the responses:

Name	Where from?	Value of Elders?	Surprise about U.S. life?
Lisa	Vietnam	Wisdom & authority	Less appreciation of elders
Kristen	Mexico	Experience & passion	Values different cultures
Kari	Euro	Matriarchal ties	Contributions matter
Mac Yang	Hmong	Keep culture alive	Adaptation comes fast
Guydeli	Russia	3 generations close	Govt provides for elders
Pat	Euro	Unique individuality	Elder resilience
Shelby	Norway	Work my chosen land	Some decide to just play
Buo Ya	Cambodia	Maintain culture	Adaptation to new culture
Saliso	Cambodia	Teach & share values	Language barrier/isolation
Dolores	Ireland	Many opportunities	Health care advances, but not available for all
Julia	Euro	Cultural heritage	Elders over 80

Eileen	Euro/Jewish	Protecting the family	Moves diminish family
Afrotu Yurko	East Africa	Spoke many languages	Appreciation of citizenship
Grace	Euro	Proud of culture	Contrasts in level and kind of engagement
Vonnie	Malaysia	Respect for elders	Parents were “old” at 40
Carol	Euro	Education valued	Contrast ageism & reality
Roland	Euro	Storytelling	Learning by sharing
Sweenly	Euro	Handle hard situations	How work in society
Dean	Euro	Babysitting grandkids	Fun caring for grandkids
Maggie	Ireland	Gathering stories	MN more multicultural
Dennis	Euro	Reach extended family	They see me as an elder!
Kristen	Euro	Civic leadership	Daily care for grandkids
Ty	Laos	Integration	Staying in own culture
Sharon	Euro	Making/keeping peace	Others show respect
Gaoly	Hmong	Role models in clan	Value of formal education
William	Euro	Distilling own wisdom	Good health & vitality
Thor	Euro	Civic-mindedness	Elders quiz on citizenship
Sue	Euro	Humor and privacy	Values matter most
Meridel	Euro	Culture transfer	How to hold culture

## RESULTS FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

### What do we have in common? What do we share in our “elderhood”?

We understand the value of cultural history – where our roots are (but this can also be a block)

Role of peacemakers/peacekeepers

Understand the capacity and potential of elders

Respect our differences – and value of sharing our stories

Storytelling (Easier one-on-one so don’t often share stories in a forum)

History of migration holds families/communities together

We value caring for our own (but this feeling can block sharing with others)

Care for grandchildren (They bring happiness and excitement. Caring for them helps us feel useful – but too much can isolate us)

Immigrants – all of us -- value education

We see that elders carry knowledge

Awareness about the importance of respect

Seek connection with younger generations

### What are the stumbling blocks or differences that keep us from sharing our “elderhood” (experience and wisdom) to benefit each other and our communities?

Language is the greatest barrier – makes access to services difficult

Isolation, based on culture, age, language, physical separateness (e.g., in senior housing)

Tendency to hesitate to ask when we do not understand  
Second/third generations have stories that are sometimes idealized  
Differences in the way each generation sees elders (broader age span,  
more variations rule out generalizations)  
Changes between generations about the value of elders (fewer  
relationships through family/blood and more through friendship)  
Differences between views of older adults and the reality – that many are  
active and want to be productive and contributing and not dependent  
Refugees and immigrants don't understand that their benefits have time  
limitations. U.S. is sending immigrants back when their visas run out,  
back to danger and war  
Change in customs – e.g., cousins can't marry in the U.S. but can in other  
cultures  
Our experiences overseas have lost value – no one cares, or they don't  
apply  
Financial obstacles  
Loss of culture as children become Americanized – Ten years from now,  
where will we find out about the Cambodian culture, or the Yiddish  
culture? How can the ideas and language of different cultures be  
respected and institutionalized?

### **NEXT STEPS**

The participants volunteered that they would like to convene this group or more mixed groups like this to have similar conversations and to go more in depth on different topics. When people are aware of the healing from war and pain that must take place, they can begin to move on and grow. The VAN Leadership Group will consider ways to create more opportunities for similar conversations.

Notes from Maricarmen Cortes and Sue Meyers

Edited by Jan Hively

10/18/04