



VAN FORUM NOTES

May 9, 2006

Ageism 101: Old People are So Alike Yet So Different

“Where do you find your bliss?”

--Robert Yahnke, class at the U of M

Welcome and Introductions

Dolores Zeller, member of the Vital Aging Network’s Leadership Group and host of the forum, welcomed participants to the forum. Dolores posed the question of the day to the group. Participants were asked to introduce themselves and provide a brief answer to the question. Question of the day: “What trait or behavior constitutes the individuality of an older adult?”

Participants provided the following responses:

- Being more involved in politics and the political process, voting
- Doing what I want when I want to do it
- Willingness to tell the truth even when it is not socially acceptable
- Confidence and joy in who they are
- Wisdom
- Socially involved
- Willingness to share life experience and an increased interest in others
- Ability to do what you want when you want to do it
- Increased curiosity and interest in learning new things
- Volunteering and helping others
- Adaptability from the simple tasks to very complex tasks, creative ways to compensate
- Achieving a balance between being active and doing to being reflective
- Integrative thinking and having more patience
- Centeredness and being able to reach out more
- Good listeners, active listening with experience
- Not having enough time and money to do what I want
- Contemplative thoughtfulness
- Saying what I think more often and more directly
- I am waiting for the time when everyone who is an older adult is comfortable acknowledging it
- A desire to be with other people, loneliness, not being able to do what you want because your income is so limited. People who are hesitant to ask family to help them out when they need it. Humor and fun. Managing despite limitations.
- Peacefulness and calmness and a lot of great stories

- Totally vulnerable – despite this they have a strong determination to manage their own affairs
- Wisdom, hesitancy to create or be creative. When they allow themselves to create there is joy or excitement. A willingness to love and be loved.
- Role models – they have had so many challenges and yet are so resilient

Introduction of Robert Yahnke

Dolores introduced Robert Yahnke, who is a Professor of Film and the Arts at the U of M. Dolores highlighted Robert's unique presentations on ageism and described them as fulfilling and rewarding and educational.

Robert began his presentation by defining ageism as unwarranted stereotypes of older adults. From Roberts' humanities background, everybody is an individual and cannot be replicated. This is contradictory to ageism.

Poems on Aging

Robert shared poems written by students in his classes over the last several years.

The author of the first poem, titled "The Invisible Elderly," said that she had been waiting to write this poem for years. She had worked in the health care industry for years and had seen over and over again how people ignored older adults.

The poem titled "When I Grow Old" speaks to the need to be able to speak the truth. Robert told the story of an AT&T retiree who went to the brokerage house every day to see how his stock was doing. He was 80 years old. One day a young man stood in front of him and blocked his view of the stock numbers. The retiree rudely told the young man to step aside – that he made a better door than a window. He was telling it like it is!

The poem titled "Old People" highlights how unique each older person is. An excerpt: "Old people - they are so alike yet so different - whose to say that all old people are the same? I guess they never got to know an old person."

Robert shared the Story of Alvin Straight, a man who rode a lawnmower across Iowa and Wisconsin. Early in the film the producer uses the point of view technique so that viewers see what the actor is seeing. The film is centered on you seeing him reacting to the world. You see people reacting to him. It is a way to get into the actor's mind. The whole idea is that you know exactly where he is. Robert sees this as one way to beat back ageism.

The poem titled "Old People Are So Alike, Yet So Different" highlights the unique journey that each individual makes in the aging process. An excerpt: "I have learned that old age does not affect every person the same way. They have history worthy of an ear. I have grown by listening about their lives."

The last poem, titled “I See You,” describes the process the author went through in seeing past the stereotypes to the real person. “When I looked at you I saw an old man...Then I looked again and I saw a person.”

Elizabeth Layton’s artwork

Elizabeth Layton suffered from depression much of her adult life. She attributes her art (started at in mid to later life) as bringing her out of her depression. She started taking art classes at a community center and became a prolific artist. She uses colored pencils in her drawings and always embeds a stunning level of detail in her pieces. Elizabeth was discovered at the age of 68. Her artwork has gone on to be exhibited across the country.

Elizabeth commented about her piece titled “Thanksgiving Dinner” that the turkey is strutting outside because it didn’t get killed – so it works better for everybody. She and her granddaughter and husband eat Kentucky Fried Chicken instead.

In “Eve in the Garden” Eve is an old woman – and why not? Her apron is made of leaves. The apple is yellow instead of red. She has not bitten the apple. There are chains on her arms. She is being evicted from the garden. Elizabeth comments that she “was just objecting to being blamed for all of the sin of the world.”

Elizabeth said in response to being compared to Grandma Moses, “we can each be one Grandma Layton, or whatever...”

Elizabeth’s husband, Glenn, was a frequent subject of her art. He greatly contributed to Elizabeth becoming a whole person again – they had a great friendship and marriage.

In one piece, Elizabeth is envisioning her death. Flowers are growing out of her, animals are surrounding her, there is a tombstone, a muted rainbow is shining on her face, and she is winking with a daisy on her eye. She looks very much at peace – she knows something we don’t know.

In Elizabeth’s piece with the multiple masks she is telling us by showing us. A recurring motif is to engage the viewer. Details of the picture include a prescription drug bottle, her dress is like peacock feathers which is very symbolic, masks on the bottom look like men. Elizabeth commented that the masks represent all of the emotions you have through your life.

“The Void” (which is a black and white drawing) is a representation of what it was like for Elizabeth in her depression. As in the picture, you feel that you are at the bottom of the barrel. You don’t want to be there but you can’t get out. You see a little light at the top. Elizabeth commented that she was lit up by the white light but she did not light up the black.

Short Film – Louise

Robert showed a short film, titled “Louise,” that shows a day in the life of a 96-year-old woman. The producer was one of Louise’s great-grandchildren.

- Robert noted the particularization of Louise, the details of her life – her spirituality, routine, adaptation, task oriented, intellectual stimulation, making 75 Humpty Dumpty dolls for great-grandchildren.
- Robert noted that this is a real woman, she has a particular history, a particular past, a particular combat with flies – they were important to her – they were keeping her alive – a way for her to do combat.
- She showed that she gives meaning to the day by harassing the gophers, for example.
- She mowed the lawn because guests mentioned they would like to do some lawn bowling. And she didn’t show disappointment when they could not come. She commented that at least the grass got cut.
- Her home was chock full of life, memories, and the importance of family.
- This reminded one participant of Dan Buettner’s Blue Zones work in which he highlights the Japanese concept that means “my reason to get up in the morning.” The website for his work is www.bluezones.com.
- Robert commented that it is similar to what he asks his students - where do you find your bliss?
- Louise finds her bliss in her routine, in the round of the day, she constantly is making these lists that will never be finished
- She also finds bliss in the whimsy and her ability to tickle herself.
- After watching this film you know Louise. Everyone will leave today and will know Louise.
- She can handle solitude (vs. loneliness). Solitude gives you energy and empowers you.

The film can be found at the website of the National Film Board of Canada at www.nfb.ca. Robert will provide a list of other films that have positive pictures of older adults.

Constitutional Amendment Related to Transportation

Margaret Donohoe, Legislative Director, MN Transportation Alliance, provided an overview of a constitutional amendment that will be on the ballot this November. Margaret’s group is very involved with organizations providing transit services around the state. Funding is critical to providing transportation that enables people to remain independent, in their own homes. One of the qualities about older people that was highlighted during the introductions was an increased tendency to be very interested in politics and being involved politics. Margaret appreciates this interest because politics affect people every day.

On November 7, 2006, Minnesotans will be given the opportunity to vote on an amendment to the state's Constitution to increase funding for highways and transit. The amendment will assure that all of the current motor vehicle sales tax revenue goes to our highway and transit systems. A law assuring that this would happen was passed years ago but was never implemented.

Currently, 54 percent of the motor vehicle sales tax is used for highway and transit systems. If the other 46 percent was dedicated to transportation it could provide an additional \$300 million.

Question: who presently gets the 46 percent? Answer: the 46 percent gets shifted into the general fund and it is unclear where it goes. The amount that will be taken out of the general fund will be very small. In the first two years economic growth will fill in this gap. The government has the ability to raise revenues and we should make sure that we cover other needs as well.

Question: What are the transit priorities? Answer: the 2030 Plan of the Metropolitan Council outlines transportation goals such as doubling the bus system and developing the Northstar commuter rail line. This funding would accelerate this plan.

Question: Why are we dedicating money for transportation? Where does this end? Answer: Article 14 of our constitution dedicates the license and gas fees for our highways. People supported this in 1946. With big infrastructure projects you need dedicated and reliable funding.

Closing Remarks

Delores thanked the speakers and participants for a great session. She highlighted the Advocacy and Leadership for Vital Aging (ALVA) certificate program based at the College of Continuing Education at the U of M. They are accepting applications for the next year. The certificate program is a good springboard for transition from work life to retirement life. More information on ALVA can be found at www.van.umn.edu.

The next monthly VAN forum will be:

June 13, 10 a.m. - noon
"Age Discrimination"
Gary Gorman, MN Department of Human Rights
Roseville Library
2180 N. Hamline Ave.
St. Paul