Aging with Purpose

Elders are living longer than ever before. Advances in technology have contributed to keeping people healthier and safer than in decades past. As the population ages, more and more Elders have retired or are nearing retirement age. For Elders, retirement is a new journey and provides many opportunities in life that might not have been available at a younger age.

Many Elders who have worked for decades take pride in the work they have done and for having provided for their families. Some Elders dread retirement for fear of losing this sense of purpose, economic stability, and connections to others in the workplace and broader community. But retirement and growing older does not mean that an Elder’s value to the community is diminished – quite the opposite. The Elder’s role is more important with age.

It’s What You Make It

At age 93, author Rhoda P. Curtis compared getting older to the experience of younger children entering adulthood. Physical changes to the body and feelings of not being seen and not being understood, in her observation, were common among Elders and younger people alike. But unlike the young, those who are older have experienced and navigated great changes in their lives already. (3) Becoming an Elder is another part of this natural cycle of life and it is one that AI/ANs understand well. Because Elders have overcome adversity in the past, they have already practiced the ability to step back and reflect on challenges – and even with challenges like aging – make a decision about how to face it. Though it has its ups and downs, aging is what you make of it. AI/AN Elders have much to offer their communities, and this can help one to adapt to his or her changing role.

A Living Library

AI/AN Elders have a unique role in their communities and society. Where aging is often viewed negatively in the general population, AI/AN Elders have many
reasons to embrace the aging process. Their traditions respect and value the role of Elders. After having successfully lived the course of a childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, Elders have been taught the lessons of those who came before them, and learned lessons of their own through experience. This lifetime of wisdom makes the roles of Elders central in AI/AN communities, from serving as leaders, teachers, traditional healers, and caregivers to the young. Elders are like a living library – they know the great stories, the traditional methods, and the history of the community and have the best advice that can be asked for. When Elders share this knowledge, they give everyone touched by their lives access to the library and they help their community advance into the future.

**Keeping Tradition Alive: New Purpose through Advocacy**

AI/AN communities not only respect Elders because of their lifetime of wisdom, but because they also share this knowledge. Elders are the link to the past, to the traditions of the culture and the history and wisdom that was shared with them in their youth. By sharing this knowledge, Elders prepare the next generation for the challenges ahead – this is the Elder’s and community’s legacy.

An Elder’s knowledge is valuable far beyond the boundaries of his or her community, too. While it is certainly important for children to listen to their Elders, Elders can also share their insights in advocacy for their communities. Because of their great experience, Elders can speak to the needs in their communities and help educate those outside of the community.

In Alaska, AN Elders have worked as advocates to explain the importance of their culture and language to non-AN people and try to incorporate native language and traditional knowledge into the education system. Their efforts are fueled by their aim to prevent the loss of their language and to demonstrate the importance of AN in the community.

Similarly, in New Mexico, Dr. Gregory Cajete has worked to bridge the traditional culture of the Tewa-speaking Pueblo tribes of the Southwest with western culture in his writings. The goal of his effort has been to educate people about those who
inhabited the land before them, and to help ensure that the language and history of this people is not lost. (6)

In both cases, Elders are using their knowledge to not only educate their own community, but to try and enlighten the outside communities as well. Elders have the power to help effect change when they share their insights into life. (6)

**Preparing the Next Generation**

AI/AN Elders are an integral part of the family. In caring for the younger ones, Elders can not only pass on their wisdom, but they can also help ensure their grandchildren have a strong foundation for life through learning. For Elders who have the time to spend playing and reading with grandchildren, they can help ensure the child develops good learning habits early in life. Caring for and teaching the young is beneficial not only for the child, but the Elder as well. (8)

One study of older Australians showed that those who cared for grandchildren were less likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease or other cognitive disorders. More broadly, there is also evidence to show that Elders who are socially-engaged are more likely to be healthy. Another survey, conducted over seven years, showed that Elders who were distant from family and socially-isolated were 26% more likely to die than those who were not. (4)(8) When Elders engage and share with their families and communities, it is clear that everyone benefits.

**Continuing in the Workforce and Volunteering Time**

Though many Elders will want to retire in older age, some may prefer to continue on in the workforce. Those who do so often feel that it helps them remain physically and mentally sharp, and socially-engaged. Continuing in the workforce allows them to continue to contribute to an organization and make a difference for those served by the organization. It also has financial benefits, as maintaining a higher income can be beneficial to those who would otherwise be living on a fixed income, like Social Security benefits. Especially for those Elders who find identity and purpose in their careers, continuing a career or starting a new one is an option - and roughly one third of all Americans aged 65-69 are doing it. (1)
Others choose instead to volunteer their time for causes and advocacy purposes. By lending their skills and talents to those in need, Elders donate a gift to the community they serve. There are a variety of ways to volunteer, including through local community organizations, religious organizations, and national groups. Volunteering helps Elders to stay socially active and contribute to their community while also allowing them to choose where and how they lend a hand. (2)

Time to Reflect, Time to Explore

As an Elder, there are some changes which are positive, and others which are not. Elders have a choice to make about how they age. While one cannot pick who they are or some of the things which might happen, one can always choose his or her attitude toward life. Especially for those Elders who are retired, there is time to both reflect on the life lived – the past, history, family, friends, and experiences – as well as to continue to learn. Lifelong learning is important for remaining healthy – in mind, body, and spirit - over time. No matter how wise one may be, there is always something new to learn.

Consider the following:

- **Be physically and mentally active.** Try to incorporate exercise and mentally-stimulating activities, such as reading and listening to music into the daily routine. (9)
- **Be socially active.** Stay engaged in the community, and participate in community events and activities. Keep in touch with family and friends. Share your experience and knowledge with others, and be open to new ideas and activities. (9)
- **Share your wisdom.** Values, traditions, and the lessons learned in life are invaluable to the next generation. As you have held dear the teachings of your own grandmother and grandfather, so too will your grandchildren cherish the insights you share with them.
- **Share your experiences.** Whether good or bad, the things you experienced and your perceptions about these experiences can be enlightening to friends, family, and policy makers. You might even stop someone from going down the wrong path!
- **Keep learning.** It is never too late to challenge yourself.
**Resources to Help**

For Elders looking for a way to volunteer their talents and time, consider reaching out to community organizations to see how you can help. Nationally, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) ([http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps/rsvp](http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps/rsvp)) and Senior Corps ([http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps](http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps)) can connect Elders to opportunities to help.

For Elders considering starting a new career, NICOA offers the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). To learn more about job training and contributing to your community, visit: [http://nicoa.org/for-elders/economic-well-being/job-training-for-older-adults-scsep/](http://nicoa.org/for-elders/economic-well-being/job-training-for-older-adults-scsep/)

**Sources**


