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Carol H. Tice

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Perspectives on Intergenerational Initiatives Past, Present and Future

by Carol H. Tice

National Information Center
for Service Learning
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197
1-800-808-SERVE



ready for being finished at the age of maturity. Young boys learned how to do men's things from their fathers and grandfathers. Similarly, little girls learned how to perform clearly defined feminine functions under the guidance of their mothers and grandmothers.

Part of the bonding within the kinship system was forged in the transmission of these roles. The family's shared activity focused on the common tasks that provided food, shelter and clothing for the household participants. Many neighbors and community members were known to each other. They served as models for the young, and they provided a watchful eye concerning the youthful generation's behavior outside the privacy of the family home. Growing up in these societies was largely a matter of paying attention and learning to follow the social rules and guidelines.

Today's children and youth are faced with a kaleidoscope of challenges and choices regarding role definitions, as well as shifting perspectives with respect to rights and responsibilities of household members. Some of these choices represent opportunity for growth and development—expanded work options for girls and women, for example, could fall into this category. Other challenges, which are less de-

ithin the last decade, the newly crafted word "intergenerational" has become a familiar working term for professionals and volunteers concerned with serving children and youth. No one seems to know who originated its use, or exactly where the first programs bringing older adults and young people together for common activities and services began. One might even wonder why it became necessary for us to create social inventions to do what natural grandparents and grandchildren used to do together as a matter of course.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead often spoke of how, in earlier societies where changes occurred slowly, children at an early age had a reasonable view of what was ahead of them as adults. They understood how they were expected to develop at each stage of growth in reaching their adult status. Childhood and youth represented rehearsal—a getting



sirable and hardly matters of personal choice, result from the deterioration of the social fabric. They seldom present a clear-cut right or wrong choice, and the consequences of these choices often go beyond the individuals most directly affected. For example, the increasing number of babies born to teenage mothers impacts on the larger society with respect to possible public cost and increased human suffering.

Traditional cultural, educational and religious value systems are strained by the growing number of decisions to be made and the increased complexity in making them. At times the tested values meet the issues in ways that move us to new growth and possibilities. Other times they do not. Clear visions of where we want to move as a nation are needed if we can expect our daily commitments to fashion a landscape of well-being for our children and their children yet unborn. The challenge spans the generations.

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hroughout history, the elder population has served as guardians of traditional values. The presence of grandparents within the family structure assured remembrance of the past with respect to the kinship's folklore and lifestyle. Continuity and a strong sense of family identity were communicated through stories, customs and celebrations.

Except for certain ethnic groups, we have now developed a style of family in which there is little expectation of much closeness between generations. Grandmother's house with its mosaic of lessons has been replaced with a condominium in the sun, complete with a VCR. A "cookie-baking granny," with, as one small boy described it, "a real bosom for resting in" is a rarity. The present-day child is more likely to have a telephone relationship with a grandparent—a jogging "Auntie Mame,"

Carol H. Tice is President of New Age, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

caught up in a whirl of activities and entertainment provided for by professionals developing special programs for the growing number of senior citizens.

Specialization, while an effective vehicle for producing many material goods, becomes a contributor to alienation when utilized exclusively in age-segregated activities and services. When we learn, work and play only with our age-peers, we begin to accept a homogeneous view of the world as our version of reality. This leads to not only a shallow, one-dimensional view of how things *are*, but inevitably begins to limit the possibilities of how they can *become*. We then find ourselves bound in the present. Faith in the possibility of real change fades. It is as though things are finished, even though possibly finished wrong.

Yet the reality is that the lives of children and youth today are not static. At increasingly early ages they are faced with making profound life-influencing choices—with or without the guidance of caring adults. The use of alcohol and other substances represents a choice. Teenage pregnancy, while for some girls indicates a lack of sexual safety from rape and incest, often is a response to peer pressure—an individual and collective choice. The increasing numbers of youths who fall into the category of teenage suicides have made a decision to check out altogether. Where are their guideposts? How do we begin to restore a sense of depth, meaning and balance in the world of a young person who is caught in a moment of confusion and despair—or who even lacks relevant information that could help him or her make wise choices?

Efforts encouraging interaction between children and youth and older adults address the need for tapping strength from the past in order to restore hope and expectations for the future. The initiatives are particularly relevant for youths whose vision and actions are limited to a distorted sense of the present. The benefits are many and far-reaching. They touch the lives of us all.

The young gain a sense of continuity and significance of the life cycle from their elders. They begin to see what the

end of life can mean while they are at its beginning. From a generation of elders who have coped with more changes than any other generation in history, this view can present a model of patience, resourcefulness and confidence. Skills for coping with life changes are shared and practiced within caring relationships.

The older participants in cross-generational activities feel welcomed into the mainstream of society. Their interests, skills and wisdom of a lifetime are utilized in relevant ways. Self-esteem is strengthened without regard to age. Positive gains in mental and physical health have been documented.

In communities where intergenerational programs are at work, families, schools and neighborhoods are strengthened. Historical and cultural traditions are restored through festivals such as Kentucky's Heritage Weekends and books like the State of Virginia's *A Quiltbook of Memories*.

Through cooperative planning for services and programs across age groups, financial resources are used to the best advantage. Meals served to older adults in schools is one example of these savings. The school facilities, paid for through years of taxes by the older people, become centers for life-long learning. Positive contact with children and youth becomes easier and more frequent.

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istorically, the concept of merging the old and the young as a service model began to show promise in the early 1970s. The Foster Grandparent Program had set the tone when it began in 1965. The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (R.S.V.P.) followed by encouraging volunteers to tutor in schools. The Administration on Aging provided grant money to start a few model programs. Federally initiated efforts continue to play a role in the development of the intergenerational landscape. However, the rising interest and momentum for increased support

for age-integrated programs stems from the considerable dedication and resourcefulness of many individuals in local communities throughout the country. It is they who are the daily witnesses to the benefits that take place when programs are organized and running smoothly.

Programs that bring young and old together in organized ways can be found in all 50 states (see "Intergenerational Programs and Resources"). New Age, Inc., a Center in Support of Intergenerational Education, Service and Research in Ann Arbor, Michigan, recently requested data concerning activities linking generations. Questionnaires were sent to governors, commissioners on aging and state superintendents of schools. Replies from 45 states indicated that a wide range of intergenerational initiatives were taking place in health and human service areas as well as in education. The report, released last May,* reflects a growing conviction that the states and localities hold the keys to future developments in this field.

Intergenerational *events* are an accepted norm. Now endorsed nationally, Grandparents Day has joined Mother's Day and Father's Day in the list of special times of honor for those groups. Data indicate that the day itself, or the concept expressed in different forms, is being promoted through state channels. More involved events such as Old Settler Days or Heritage Weeks are becoming familiar and welcomed celebrations.

Activities and programs range widely in emphasis. Tutorial endeavors, educational enrichment activities, artistic efforts, historical and cultural projects, and health and human service initiatives are only a few examples of such efforts. The scope and variety are impressive. Voluntarism is often a key component, but where programs have survived beyond a burst of initial enthusiasm, professionals have often been present to provide coordination and

ongoing guidance and encouragement.

Support for local programs has been multifaceted, and at times uneven, in the past. However, there is an increasing awareness on the part of school board and educational administrators concerning the large returns in the classroom for an investment in coordination for elder participation. Some far-seeing senior centers and long care facilities have initiated programs and support for intergenerational activities involving schools and other groups serving youth.

State governments and agencies are becoming involved in significant ways. California youth and elders benefit from legislation supporting intergenerational day care centers for young children. The California Department of Education is currently promoting legislation that will support the use of the state's schools for programs and activities involving older adults on behalf of latchkey children. Bill Honig, California Superintendent of Public Instruction, recently commented: "There is a clear and critical need for vastly expanded after-school services for children. Public school facilities are obvious sites to be utilized for this kind of extended child care. However, we need to provide additional resources to maintain the school plants for such double use."

Last May, New York and California held statewide planning conferences to set agenda in support of intergenerational initiatives in their jurisdictions. Participants included commissioners and directors of youth and aging networks, who explored such areas for bringing together older and younger people as health, education, housing, human services, justice and quality of life, including work and leisure. The New York conference directed its attention to the potential for strengthening families through cross-age cooperation in these areas. Designed and facilitated by New Age, Inc.

with support from the Edward W. Hazen Foundation and the Luke B. Hancock Foundation, the planning initiatives created models of cooperation and realistic goal-setting for enhancing the well-being of people of all ages in those states. Proceedings will be available through New Age, Inc. in early 1986.

The planning conferences enabled an important step to be taken toward *systematizing* intergenerational initiatives within existing state agencies. It is not necessary to create new bureaucracies. The cause of bringing generations together in caring ways will be served best by raising awareness and responsible action *within and between* agencies and organizations that are already in place. In his keynote address at the New York State Planning Conference, Joseph Coccozza, Ph.D., Executive Director of the New York State Council on Children and Families, described it this way:

"Seldom has there been a coordinated effort to systematically develop and support intergenerational service programs. This is due, in part, to the structure and organization of the public and private service agencies and the current configuration of state and federal funding streams. Most agencies have been developed to serve a particular population—either the young or the old. Even those agencies that provide services to both populations rarely integrate or coordinate intergenerational programs. In general, human service agencies have a narrow focus of program development that does not include both populations."

What do we need to make this a reality? I believe that we first need a shift in our thinking and actions—a paradigm shift—and I see four components to this:

- A conceptual shift in the way we think of "family." If the family we inherited at birth is not available, an extended family acquired through support groups, through voluntary work with the young and the old, through structured activities, or even through just the sharing of space can provide the same opportunities.

**The States Speak: A New Age Report on Intergenerational Initiatives*, available at \$9.00 per copy from New Age, Inc., 1212 Roosevelt, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48104.

WAYS CHILDREN TODAY TO ALL SERVICES



- An attitudinal shift toward different age groups. We have let our assumptions about what is appropriate for one age group or another, one activity or another, one building or another, limit the opportunities we have available. We need to change our expectations—deepen the pool of our resources—by considering the abilities and interests of both groups.

- A structural shift. We have arranged our communities, our recreation and our education into age-segregated strata . . . we have continued to move populations apart. Now it is time to figure out how to move the groups together again.

- A shift in the way we manage resources. We need to move toward more flexible funding that would enable joint

programming for the young and the old.

In addition, a second step must be taken: As Dr. Cogozza indicated at the New York State Planning Conference, all of us, in ways appropriate to our roles and responsibilities, must do what we can to encourage and establish intergenerational initiatives.

Organizations with a national scope have already assumed leadership by creating intergenerational dimensions to existing programs. Many groups, both public and private, are working cooperatively and imag-

inatively with other national groups toward these goals. The American Association of Retired Persons is exemplary in its efforts to raise awareness of its 19 million members with respect to its potential service involvement with children and youth.

There are other concrete signs that the underpinnings needed to sustain intergenerational programs through future years are forthcoming. If passed, the Intergenerational Education Volunteer Network Act—introduced in the Senate by Carl Levin of Michigan (S. 1022) and in the House of Representatives by Edward B. Roybal of California (H.R. 1587)—will provide funding for programs in schools to use older people as educational resources. As federal and state legislation is drafted, supported and implemented, local program personnel can direct more of their energies to carrying out the work itself than to fighting for survival.

In looking to the future of intergenerational programming—whether at local, state or national levels—a few words of caution need to be expressed:

- Benefits should be felt in an ongoing, day-to-day way by all participating age groups. If we fashion programs in which one generation simply “serves” the other, eventually the “goodness” will be used up and burnout rates will be high. This principle applies to professionals as well as volunteers. With a little careful thought and planning, the benefits can go all ways, thus assuring long-lasting involvement.

- An awareness of past, present and future should be cultivated and maintained. Within organizations, a sense of the group’s history, including the individuals who created that history, should be remembered, appreciated and brought forward with new roles into the present and future. Their voices need to continue to be heard as new leadership assumes current, more structural roles.

At programmatic levels, elder participants should be invited and encouraged to share their own experiences with children and youth. If, through our efforts to accomplish a certain task or master a particular skill, we screen out the “informal dimension” or what the

older person has to offer on his or her own initiative, we lose a central and invaluable part of the special riches they have to bring. The sharing of life stories also strengthens the older person's identity. The volunteer is a unique and special person rather than an object filling a volunteer slot for the performance of prescribed duties.

- Multicultural diversity of values and lifestyle should be encouraged and promoted. We must invite people to share the integrity of who they are. That "permission" is at the same time an invitation for children to become the best of who they are. We do not fool our young when we impose a veneer of behavior simply in order to gain approval or control. In intergenerational programs we have opportunities to create a sense of belonging among people of diverse ages, backgrounds and levels of achievement. The emphasis on a "gift exchange" celebrates what we as human beings have to share with one another—our life store of experience, skills, values and dreams.

- Intergenerational initiatives should continue to focus on meeting the deep needs of children and older people. We are not starting new clubs with activities that are interesting because they now involve different aged people. We must continue to keep our eyes on the values and experiences that promote well-being in both the young and the old. These efforts must include the prevention of mental and physical dysfunction, prevention of decisions fraught with suffering, and prevention of being bound in the present without a vision for the possibilities of the future.

- Cooperation must remain a keynote in our operational approaches. If we try to apply competitive technologies to intergenerational efforts, programs could lose their potential for uniqueness and local responsiveness in efforts to become "the best" according to some pre-packaged notion of what is good. Our energies must be bent toward quality of effort and excellence in programming for all who endeavor to work in the area. By working together we

share each other's strengths and provide balance for any weaknesses. We must become mentors for and provide encouragement for each other.

In the years ahead, as we work to link the generations, the ways in which we work together will characterize the tapestry of well-being we create. If we invest in sharing rather than possessing and protecting for "political wins," we will provide leadership through service. If we encourage and support each other for excellence in all programs, rather than only award a few "stars," we will have tapped an unparalleled opportunity for reweaving the social fabric in our country. In so doing, we will make visible those fragile strands of humaneness that affirm us in caring and responsible places in the human family—from generation to generation. ■



Descriptions of a variety of program models are compiled in *A Guide to Intergenerational Programs*, published in May 1984 by the National Association of State Units on Aging with funds from the Administration on Aging, OHDS.

Intended as a source of ideas, models of sound practice and resources that can be useful in program design and implementation, the 77-page guide discusses the content, characteristics and impact of 60 programs involving intergenerational activities in 10 areas: child care; elementary and secondary education; higher education; vulnerable youth; political action and community planning; arts, humanities and enrichment; home sharing; grandparenting; chore services/employment; and informal family and community supports. Sources and resources are provided at the end of each section. An overview of the role of state units on aging, with examples of the approaches used in four states, is also included.

Copies of *A Guide to Intergenerational Programs* are available at \$10.00 each from the National Association of State Units on Aging, 600 Maryland Ave., S.W., Suite 208, Washington, D.C. 20024.

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Among the wealth of materials on intergenerational programming produced by the National Council on the Aging (NCOA) is a catalog profiling 90 programs of various types in operation across the country. The 136-page publication (with four indices), published in 1983, may be ordered for \$9.00 per copy from the Publications Department, National Council on the Aging, 600 Maryland Ave., S.W., West Wing 100, Washington, D.C. 20024.

Information on other NCOA intergenerational publications—including *Community Planning for Intergenerational Programming*, *Working With Older People: A Link Between Generations* and *Strategies for Linking the Generations*—is also available from NCOA's Publications Department.

The *Aging and Community Education Connection*, a computerized data base operated by the Community Education Center on Aging (CECA), a national resource center based in Little Rock, Arkansas, currently lists some 1,000 community-based programs that involve senior adults. Information was gathered over a 2-year period through surveys of local, state and national organizations and programs, and information dissemination began last January.

The *Connection* offers such data as program title, activity and function, together with address and telephone number; participants' age and sex; management and staffing; and funding and evaluation. In addition, information is available on expert contact persons in the field of aging and on resources dealing with particular aging topics.

CECA was established in 1982, with funding from the C.S. Mott Foundation, to provide information and assistance to individuals or organizations interested in establishing or expanding community-based programs involving older persons. Further information on CECA and the *Connection* may be obtained from the Community Education Center on Aging, 2723 Foxcroft Rd., Suite 211, Little Rock, Ark. 72207. ■

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A great variety of resources are available to help persons interested in initiating intergenerational programs and activities. Many of these are mentioned in the articles in this issue and in the sidebars and footnotes that accompany them. Some others are listed below.

ACTION

**Foster Grandparents Program
Retired Senior Volunteer
Program**

806 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20525

Local Foster Grandparents and R.S.V.P. projects are listed in telephone directories; information on local programs may also be obtained from state ACTION offices or from

ACTION headquarters in Washington, D.C.

**American Association of Retired
Persons**

Special Projects—

**Intergenerational Activities
1909 K St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20049**

Program materials, including a film, to help promote understanding of aging among children.

**Center for Understanding Aging
Fran Pratt, Director
Conont School Building
80 Taylor Rd.
Acton, Mass. 01720**

Workshops and curriculum materials to promote an understanding of aging and related issues.

**Elvirita Lewis Foundation
5905 Soquel Dr., Suite 100
Soquel, Calif. 95073**

Operates intergenerational child care projects and publishes a variety of materials, including a guide to introducing older volunteers into child care centers.

**Intergenerational Clearinghouse
Mary Stamstad, Director
Retired Senior Volunteer Program
of Dane County, Inc.
540 W. Olin Ave.
Madison, Wis. 53715**

Publishes a newsletter (\$5.00 per subscription) with information on intergenerational programs and activities throughout the country.

**Wisconsin Positive Youth
Development Initiative, Inc.
Kathe Thorp, Executive Director
30 W. Mifflin St., Suite 908
Madison, Wis. 53703**

Recently published *Intergenerational Programs: A Guide to Community Renewal*; disseminates information on the value of intergenerational programs.