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Jane Salisbury

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Long Live Libraries (and our Patrons)

by Jane Salisbury

Jane Salisbury supervises Library Outreach Services, but she has worked in many capacities at MCL over the past 25 years, including reference, youth and special projects. Before she came to MCL, she worked in libraries and schools in California, Alaska and Zimbabwe. Jane may be reached at janesa@multcolib.org.

Whenever the topic of the demographic shift in the older population comes up, the conversation turns to terminology. What should people over 50 be called? Or over 55? Or maybe 62? Are they seniors? Or older adults? Or are they just 50+? Are they catching a second wind? Or entering their third age? Is it the "Baby Boom" or the "silver tsunami" or the "pig in the python"? This confusion regarding nomenclature points to our anxiety over the increasingly larger older population, and our uncertainty about how to serve the adults of today and tomorrow. There is no denying what is happening: never in human history have so many lived so long.[1]

As our aging population grows, one thing is clear: older adults cannot be neatly categorized. There are at least two generations after the age of 50, since so many people are living well into their 80s and 90s. Many adults in middle age have had children later in life, and must now raise their teenagers and care for their aging parents at the same time. The needs of these two generations of older adults are very different: the younger group may still be working and supporting children and parents, while the older group is entering a phase of leisure, creativity, and perhaps declining health and energy. But both generations of older adults came of age at a time when the library was a staple of community life and an understood benefit. They know the traditional uses of the safe, convenient, free, open public library. However, there they diverge, something we are beginning to see at Multnomah County Library, in several ways.

First, libraries have tended to see "seniors" as lovers of cozy mysteries and historical biographies, spy fiction and Westerns. This no longer holds true for many of our outreach and home-bound patrons: the younger cohort reads more widely, in literary fiction and other genres that do not fit the old stereotype. Second, many of these younger older adults, roughly between the ages of 60 and 80, have spent at least the second half of their working life using computers, and are savvy enough to navigate library websites and read e-books. They do not fit the stereotype of the older adult who may struggle to master the mouse, a description more likely to apply to adults between the ages of 80 and

Older adults are often isolated, and none are more likely to be so than immigrants who have come to this country late in life, with little or no command of English. The same principles can be applied to these patrons: meet them where they are, without preconceptions, taken them seriously and listen. At Multnomah County Library, we have gradually built a trusting and enthusiastic group of patrons in several of the retirement homes we visit, by bringing bilingual staff to speak with residents, materials in Russian and Chinese, and most importantly, a spirit of inquiry about their lives and their interests. For example, at Kirkland Union Manor, an affordable housing complex of 280 apartments in southeast Portland, Library Outreach Services brings monthly service to the older adults who live there, many of whom are immigrants. Mandarin, Cantonese, and Russian-speaking staff have been working closely with residents to explain our services, emphasize that they are free, and find out what they want and need. In a recent article from the *Oregonian* (House, 2013), pictures tell the story of the universal appeal of reading, and the essential connection that sensitive and skilled library staff can make for older adults in challenging circumstances:

> Last month, library worker Angela Tveretinova began joining the team in its visits to Kirkland. Her collection of Russian titles has already begun attracting attention. On a recent afternoon, Vera Volkova quietly perused Tveretinova's table of Russian books. It was Volkova's first time using the public library. She had assumed the books there were only in English. Plus, at her age, getting to the library is no small task.
>
> "I'm very grateful for the attention," Volkova said through a translator.

House, K. (2013, December 18). Multnomah County Library reaches Chinese, Russian, other immigrant seniors through retirement home program. *The Oregonian.* Retrieved from http://tinyurl.com/p7ybv5c

100. As library outreach programs strive to serve these patrons, many of whom are on the leading edge of the Baby Boom, it behooves us to let go of old assumptions about age. We must broaden the selection of materials we bring to older patrons, and be a bit more inquiring about their tastes. We must also cultivate a broader view of their technical abilities—for example, organizing programs that encourage peers to teach each other. A common trend in libraries is that many volunteers are themselves older, and are teaching their peers and their elders digital literacy.

In fact, one of the great lessons of the change that is coming, demographically and culturally, is that we should drop *many* of our assumptions about age. As Jack Rowe asks, "Why is there an assumption that there is no upside [to the coming aging of America]?"[2] Long life will give our children more generations of grandparents to know. It will give us more years of

creativity and community, more time to spend together, more life experience to share. This is where the library can play a great part in serving older adults, by dropping the assumptions connected to older generations, whether they are Baby Boomers or their parents.

Retiring assumptions does not mean ignoring reality. The most successful services for older adults do not deny the realities of aging, which can include losses and impairments, mental and physical. They also do not deny the rich curiosity and experience of older adults, the continuing need to learn and create. Librarians need to understand how to communicate with patrons who have cognitive impairments, and physical limitations such as hearing loss and low vision. We also need to treat our patrons as intellectually curious, ready to take on new challenges and creatively engaged.

One of the most intriguing initiatives in libraries in recent years is the Lifetime Arts project,[3] which among other organizations, promotes the arts in the lives of older adults across the entire aging spectrum. The Lifetime Arts founding principles include developing the creative capacity of older adults. Very quickly, libraries became partners in this effort, and now there is a marvelous resource called the *Creative Aging Toolkit for Public Libraries.*[4] This toolkit rejoices in aging, and gives libraries a foundation and specifics for offering rich, non-stereotypical, enlivening programming.

Lifetime Arts takes aging seriously, as do many other engaging programs in libraries across the country. By offering arts programming with professional teachers, long-term classes, and performances or exhibitions as culminating events, they have built community, awakened creativity and diminished some of the isolation of age. These are programs that can be replicated at libraries of any size and adapted to local tastes and budgets. One of the great beauties of art programs and of reading itself is that they ask the Big Questions, which are often most interesting to people as they age: What is life for? How can I express myself? What can I leave as a legacy?

If we aim library services at life stages and at the needs of individuals, rather than at specific generations, we are much more likely to develop services that will actually stand up to the passage of time. Rather than thinking of how to reach baby boomers, per se, that narrowly-defined generation born between 1946 and 1964, we might better focus on the needs of all adults in the middle of their lives: support for their complicated families, finances, health and work, escape and enlightenment for busy lives. Instead of thinking only about the older generation in terms of their Depression and war years' experiences, we should also consider what life will be like for a future generation of adults who may very well live to be 100. What are the implications of such a long life for health, creativity, and place? Broadening our thinking beyond the confines of the current generations, dropping the labels, and looking at the true stages of a long life will help us build services that make sense.

[1] This succinct statement of the situation comes from the PBS project Coming of Age in an Aging America (http://theagingamericaproject.com/), an enlightening film full of great information. A wonderful summary of the film (and a call to action) is available here: http://youtu.be/ZOA1v4-2Fos.

[2] PBS. Coming of Age in an Aging America. http://theagingamericaproject.com/

[3] http://www.lifetimearts.org

[4] http://creativeagingtoolkit.org/