

TIME GOES BY

what it's really like to get older



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Thursday, 30 August 2007

What It's Like To Be Retired

CULTURE Elderblogger Mary Ann of **Five Wells** is featured in a new documentary titled *101 Ways to Retire – or Not!*, produced by Sue Perlgut and Christopher Julian.

Now that I've screened the video, that "or Not" portion of the title appears to be the operative point of view. None of the eight "retired" people interviewed throughout the documentary, all living in the vicinity of Ithaca, New York, are taking it easy. One teaches languages. A couple raises orchids commercially. Others work as a school bus aide, a house cleaner and a caregiver. Mary Ann is a member of the Town Board.

And all that is in addition to volunteering, gardening, choir singing, taking dance and exercise classes, raising chickens, traveling and studying. These people's lives and interests are as varied as any group of younger people's.

It was amusing to find that most of them dislike the term "senior citizen" as much as I do, and they don't think of themselves as retired in the traditional sense. Part of the reason for that is retirement from paid employment is not an option for most of them. The documentary alludes to problems of ill health and money among the interviewees, but skims past those details to focus on the upbeat.

However, at different moments, almost everyone speaks to the importance of money: "Social Security is not enough." "Save your money." "Save money out of every paycheck – even \$5.00." "Save." "Save." "Save."

With the exception of one participant, they say they don't have time for senior centers; they are too busy "still doing what I've always done" (although one admits, without apparent regret, to doing it a bit more slowly).

This is an important point. Just because we don't continue to pursue our midlife careers full or even part time doesn't mean our interests and passions – related to our career or our leisure endeavors – change. I worked in mainstream

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media all my life and I still track it, keep up with trends, read journalism reviews and apply the knowledge from my decades of employment to my current "career" of elderblogging. I cannot possibly be alone in this as this documentary makes clear.

In an interview conducted by email, producer Sue Perlcut said, "I do think that we need to find a new word for what it means to be 'retired'. It's just not a good word for what many people are doing."

Sue is right. Like "senior citizen," "retirement" conjures images of people in rocking chairs napping or watching television. But I wonder if that pejorative notion was ever so and if the people in this documentary are really "redefining" retirement, as the media repeatedly tells us baby boomers are doing.

My memories of old people I knew when I was growing up is that they were as busy as anyone else. One worked every day at her church. The grandmother who lived with a friend raised the family's pre-school children after their mother died. An old man in the neighborhood worked as a gardener for many local homeowners. And my mother served on the board of directors of her former employer nearly until her death. I don't remember old people sitting around doing nothing.

If "retired" people are more frequently starting new or part-time businesses these days than in the past, it is because there is more opportunity for it than there was 50 years ago. Particularly because of the internet, large numbers of businesses can be operated from home, and due to that and new kinds of service businesses, start-up costs are minimal these days.

We mis-remember, I suspect, what the old were doing when we were young and so-called "active retirement" is not as new as we are told.

I was surprised and it was fun toward the end of the documentary to hear Mary Ann quote Time Goes By with a shot of this blog.

This is a lively, thoughtful video that gives more than a picture of contemporary retirement; it does a great job of showing what elders are really like in their daily lives at home and in their various endeavors.

You can find out more at the website, 101waystoretireornot.com.

[At The Elder Storytelling Place today, kenju wonders what might have happened during a **Drama in a Strip Mall Parking Lot.**]

– Jay Rosen, PressThink

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