

AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

January/February 2012

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Interview: How Swedish Granddads Won School Children's Hearts

One man's offer to help a handicrafts teacher at a school mushroomed into a national program boasting 1,000 class "granddads" in schools across Sweden today.

The program was recently profiled in an article by Dr. Ann-Kristin Boström, director of education in the Swedish National Agency for Education and special advisor for the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research. Boström is currently a research fellow at Encell, National Centre for Lifelong Learning at Jönköping University in Sweden.

The article appeared online in the Journal of Intergenerational Relationships (Aug. 30, 2011).

To learn more, AHB caught up with Dr. Boström in Jönköping, Sweden.

Ruth Dempsey: This is a wonderful program, and it all started with one volunteer. Is that right?

Ann-Kristin Boström: Yes, he was especially thinking of the boys and their need to have adult men as role models because there were many female teachers in the school.

RD: So what do granddads do in the classroom?

AKB: Granddads help out in all kinds of ways. They do whatever needs to be done, under the direction of the teacher. So, for example, they assist individual pupils with their work and accompany students during excursions outside the school. They help pupils solve conflicts. They accompany students during their breaks and in the dining hall at lunch. They also help “new ones” adjust to their new school and feel secure.

RD: Do they need any special qualifications?

AKB: In the early days, the project group interviewed the prospective granddad to find him the right school and to see if he was interested in supporting children in a positive way.

For several years now, granddads have been required to take a semester course, which introduces them to the basics of education and includes work in a school setting. A mix of theory and practice is important. If they pass the exam, they are certified Klassmorfar (class granddad) and receive a certificate.

RD: What do pupils say about the class granddad?

AKB: The small ones like him very much and follow him around during breaks because they feel safe. Teenagers give him the thumbs up because he is not a parent or a teacher, so there is no pressure from him. He is just there to listen and help when needed.

RD: And what do teachers appreciate most about the class granddad?

AKS: They can focus on teaching and help the students that have special needs. They like that he can accompany them for activities outside the school. It’s also nice to have another adult in the classroom to share conversation.

RD: You say the Swedish education system is constructed in a way that promotes lifelong learning. How so?

AHB: For example, the granddads get their education by going to courses at different Folk High Schools. Folk high schools are a form of popular education that receive state subsidies while remaining free to develop their own programs. The granddads do not have to pay. They are eligible for the course if they have been unemployed for a period of time and they want to have another role in society.

RD: It’s amazing how the program has grown: from one to 1,000 granddads. How did it attract so many volunteers?

AHB: A happy mix of circumstances. There is a need from the schools for more adults. And some adults, for various reasons, are looking for new opportunities – a new role.

The class granddads talk about feeling needed in the schools as supports, as listeners and as comforters. They say they have gained an expanded social network with other adults at the school and very positive energy from the pupils.

RD: There is now a national association: “Class Granddads for Children.” What does it do?

AHB: The aim of the Granddads program is to promote the development of children and enrich their lives.

The national organization supports the program by maintaining official political and bureaucratic contacts and holding meetings with the regional offices twice during the year.

The regional offices play a hands-on role ensuring granddads get the required education and certification. They work hard to create successful matches: the right man for the right school. Today there are granddads working in classrooms from preschool to upper secondary schools.

RD: Clearly, the program has been a resounding success. What do you see as some of the benefits?

AHB: In Sweden, as in other parts of the industrialized world, older and younger people are, to a large extent, distanced from one another. This intergenerational program brings them together and contributes to social capital.

Teachers say the program helps build bridges between the generations and improves the quality of life for the pupils by helping them feel secure in school.

The men very much enjoy spending time with the younger generation and are energized by their contact. So, it's a win-win.

Study: Spiritual Orientation Bolsters Aging Process

New research suggests a spiritual orientation could be a source of strength for some women in later life.

The study by Lydia Manning from Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) is based on data from interviews with eight pagan women, aged 43 to 68 years. Five had been practicing paganism for 25 years; two for more than 10 years; and one was new to the practice. Seven of the participants were wives and mothers, and one had never married.

The study found the women were attracted to paganism because it:

- emphasizes nature-based spirituality;
- lacks institutional structures;

- encourages diversity; and
- supports personal development throughout life.

The findings appeared online in the *Journal of Aging Studies* (Sept. 22, 2011).

Croning ritual

All participants incorporated aspects of the Goddess or the Divine Feminine in their beliefs. In paganism, women's development encompasses three stages: maiden, mother and crone.

Five of the women had croning rituals to mark their passage into elderhood.

"Croning" ceremonies can be adapted to suit each individual. The ritual also includes some common elements such as:

- sharing life stories;
- gift-giving; and
- marking age as entry into a wisdom stage of life.

Here's how one participant described her croning:

The way I look at the wisdom years really starts at the second Saturn cycle, so I figured out when that was and I had the ceremony at that time. I divided up my life into eight phases, like the phases of Saturn and I saw the theme for each phase. What I did, I picked out the important things that happened at each phase and then saw what the overlying theme was. I actually made a booklet and people could look through that if they wanted. . .

Most of the people at my croning knew me already; most were pagans a few weren't. So, I talked about them too and how they made a difference in my life. I had them all bring some thoughts about what they thought wisdom was and how it was working in their lives . . .

Celebrating the crone

According to the participants, the crone archetype offers women a positive image of aging, in contrast to society's negative images.

Well, it does help that we have a Crone Goddess. A human image that we can recognize as the divine and that other people around us in our groups recognize as divine. It's like we're not just invisible and non-represented in spiritual life, which older women are often neglected all together in other religions and society for that matter, there's just nothing for them to identify with. It helps to know as you change and age, you can identify with divinity.

As well, becoming a crone helped individual women to accept the aging process, especially their aging body.

Becoming a crone has been a pathway that has helped me with who and what I am . . . accepting the changes of life and definitely with my body. That's a big thing; accepting change is not just all this or all that, it's a process. The longer I'm a crone the more comfortable aging feels.

Power of spiritual practice

The findings suggest that a spiritual practice, such as paganism, could be a source of strength for some women in later life. Manning emphasized that a spiritual orientation helped these women embrace aging, turning it from an experience of dread to one of celebration and connection.

Interview: Older Adults Show Resilience in Flood Disaster

With extreme weather events on the rise around the world, researchers are turning their attention to the needs of older people in disaster situations.

New research offers a glimpse into the lives of flood victims 14 months after flooding caused major damage to Kaitaia, a town in the far north region of New Zealand in 2007. Robyn Tuohy and Christine Stephens from Massey University in New Zealand found that older adults used their past experiences or biographical capital and their sense of personal identity to maintain resilience in the crisis.

Touhy, the lead investigator, is a doctoral student at the Joint Centre for Disaster Research/ School of Psychology at Massey University.

The research appeared online in the Journal of Aging Studies (July 19, 2011).

AHB reached Robyn Tuohy in Wellington, New Zealand.

Ruth Dempsey: The adults in the study were evacuated from their homes because of rising floodwaters in the small North Island township of Kaitaia. Can you describe them for me?

Roby Tuohy: There were nine participants in all: four males and five females. Five of them lived independently in the community. Actually, they all lived in council owned seniors flats on a single street. They ranged in age from late 60s to late 70s. The other four participants were residents of a rest home. These were aged from mid-70s to late 80s.

RD: "Brenda", who lived in one of the council flats, seemed unaware of the danger until she noticed flashing lights and saw the firemen . . .

RT: There was no advance warning, which may have been one reason.

RD: What did she do?

RT: Brenda was an independent woman, but the emergency evacuation in the dark frightened her.

After she received the fireman's warning to evacuate, she went into her flat intending to organize things. But she did not gather items together and shift important items to a higher level, as she had done in a previous flood.

She wanted to get out of her flat immediately because she did not know how close the levee was to overflowing. All she took with her was a pair of track pants and her medication. She just got in her car and drove away.

During the interview, Brenda emphasized adapting to life after the flood: "Like as I say, people thought that I would be shattered [referring to the flood] you know, and I think because of the life I've led I wasn't, and because I had insurance . . ."

RD: "Kaye", another tenant, was coping with the death of her daughter when the disaster hit . . .

RT: That's right. Kaye came to Kaitaia two years before the flood. She was in poor health and her daughter offered to look after her, but five months later her daughter died.

RD: How did you find her a year later?

RT: The flood hit Kaye hard. She was shocked that she had lost so many possessions, including her bed and clothing.

Worst of all, she lost her treasured wool and pattern collection, which was a huge part of her life.

Kaye talked about how people helped one another after the flood. "And a lot of people I didn't know have now become my friends and some of them are here [in the nearby flats], most of us in here are flood victims, and we have all got to know each other."

In fact, when the residents returned to their refurbished flats, they instituted monthly dinner outings and special birthday events.

RD: "Bill" was able to provide assistance to emergency personnel . . .

RT: Bill was the youngest person in the rental community, and provided everyday practical assistance such as changing light bulbs for his older neighbours. He was aware of which residents were the most vulnerable in the flood and, initially, he assisted emergency personnel to access their flats.

RD: Bill lost his car and his furniture. He refused to allow the authorities to remove the two armchairs that had belonged to his mother . . .

RT: Yes, Bill was able to disinfect and hose down the two chairs and hide them at a friend's place.

He lost possessions going back more than 50 years, including all the photographs from his years in the navy.

Still, Bill said the turmoil did not affect him as much as it did some of the others: "I was in the navy for a very long time, so the stress it affected the others in the flats, but it didn't me, 'cos stress was part and parcel of the job."

RD: What about the people in the rest home?

RT: All the residents were evacuated. Frail residents spent the night at the local hospital. Those who were more mobile were evacuated to the local school.

The staff cared for residents until they returned to the home the following day. As it turns out, the rest home escaped the floodwaters.

RD: You interviewed several of the people from the home, including "Tom". What do you know about him?

RT: Tom had been widowed for 20 years. Over time, he became lonely in the community and decided to move to a rest home. His children worried the home was not the place for him because he was outward-looking and interested in world events. But he stuck to his decision and has been happy ever since.

During the emergency, Tom was evacuated to the hospital. He was not worried by the sudden nighttime evacuation, rather he felt safe during the emergency. He was confident in the decisions being made.

RD: Surprisingly perhaps, the flood opened up a wider world for Tom . . .

RT: That's right. The flood had a big impact on Tom because it allowed him to feel part of an important community event that extended beyond the rest home.

"Well I have been through a lot of experiences in my life and that [the flood] is one of them that I will never forget, because I was in the war and I saw things there, and when I compare them, this flood stands out."

He added, "I've been very lucky in my life and saw a lot of my mates killed and all that, and this is something I will always think about: how lucky I was, and here I am today."

RD: So what did you learn about older people in disaster situations?

RT: I was struck by their resilience. The findings suggest that a lifetime of experience provides resources for psychological resilience rather than vulnerability.

I also gained valuable insights into how older adults use their past experiences and their sense of personal identity to deal with challenge and change.

Take Brenda, for example. She saw herself as a self-sufficient woman. She had been through a previous flood. True, she didn't feel she had handled the recent flood as well as the earlier one, but she evacuated herself and she had insurance. So, as she explained, she was not "shattered" by the event.

Similarly, Tom used his wartime experiences and his identity as an engaged older adult to make sense of the flood and to demonstrate interest in a world beyond the home.

The study also highlights the need for practical and social support in disaster situations.

The rest home residents' stories reflected the importance of being protected and cared for during the evacuation

All the community-dwelling older adults received assistance to find temporary accommodation. They also received financial welfare assistance to replace household items if they did not have insurance

The findings also point to the need for ongoing support during the recovery phase. Kaye is a case in point. At the time of the interview, she was dealing with a current concern related to the flood – an expensive electricity account that was incorrect. She was very grateful for the advocacy support she received to deal with the problem.

Report: Wanted: Policy for the Arts in Older Age

From dance to cinema, painting to theatre, Bealtaine-time celebrates creativity in older age.

The Bealtaine festival takes place across Ireland in May each year (Bealtaine is Gaelic for the month of May).

According to Aging & Opportunity, the sponsoring organization, the 2010 arts festival attracted more than 100,000 participants, who attended 2500 events organized by more than 500 partners.

The events are organized by older adults, arts officers, librarians, artists and health-care workers. The festival also harnesses contributors from small community groups, retirement associations, residential care settings and public libraries.

Some programs, like writing and visual arts, are long-term, taking place throughout the year and from year to year. Others are one-off activities, such as a drama workshop, offered during the festival.

Bealtaine gets thumbs up

In a recent report, the festival garnered rave reviews from participants across the country.

The evaluative study was carried out by Eamon O'Shea and Áine Ní Léime of the National University of Ireland in Galway. The research appeared online in the journal *Ageing & Society* (July 22, 2011).

Older adults said the festival:

- nurtures personal development;
- enhances quality of life;
- fosters social interaction; and
- builds community.

Bealtaine nurtures personal development

Participants talked about learning new skills and even discovering hidden talents.

"I have to say I have found my voice since joining this group," a member of the writer's group noted.

One long-time closet writer found the courage to admit in public that he had written before: "You would be kind of ashamed to say you were writing. I have heard this from other people who say the same."

Another respondent remarked, "Becoming part of a craft can help you develop your ideas."

Significantly, older adults said the opportunity to showcase their talents in a public forum boosted their confidence and had a positive effect on their self-esteem.

Bealtaine enhances quality of life

Eighty-six per cent of participants said the festival had improved their quality of life.

One member of an intergenerational project stressed the importance of having something to look forward to:

It gave me a new lease of life. I'm a widow and I live alone and it was marvellous to have something to get out for – to get involved in and then to forget your pains and aches and get completely immersed in the whole thing.

Along the same line, another participant said his art reduced anxieties about his health:

I probably think about the art more than I think about my health. If you keep worrying about yourself, you're going to get something anyway so that in itself is a good thing.

Finally, a visual artist described the psychological boost she derived from completing a painting:

You're getting out of the house and you've something always to look forward to and then in the evenings I can paint away for a few hours and it makes life a lot easier to live if you have interests. I think what kills people is lack of interest . . . I'm happy in myself because being creative gives you so much satisfaction. . . . It gives you a sense of well-being if you do a good painting or if you do a good piece of sculpture with clay.

Bealtaine fosters social interaction

A huge number – 95 per cent of participants – credited Bealtaine with broadening their social networks.

“My life would be very lonely without Bealtaine,” a member of the writer’s group explained. “I have Bealtaine friends – we meet every Friday – this group wouldn’t exist without Bealtaine.”

Other participants reported meeting friends, locally and across the county, who shared similar interests, whether singing or organizing.

Bealtaine also forged bonds with groups isolated in the past such as people in long-term care.

“I suppose it has broken down the walls of the hospital,” one hospital worker and Bealtaine organizer explained. “It has opened it up and it has involved everybody, especially the community.”

Bealtaine builds community

A striking 87 per cent of participants reported greater community involvement, thanks to Bealtaine. Some said they had joined community groups and even engaged in fund-raising activities for these organizations. Others talked about getting to know younger people in their area for the first time.

On the downside, the study found only 20 per cent of older people in Ireland get to experience Bealtaine. Participation rates among men generally and very old women are particularly low across a range of arts activities. On the upside, participation rates have increased annually since the festival’s inception in 1996.

Aging and the arts

According to the study, Bealtaine fosters a sense of personal identity, competence and connectivity among participants at the national and local levels.

Specifically, it promotes the involvement of older adults in the arts as:

- audience members;
- creators;
- participants;
- organizers; and
- decision makers.

As well, the festival contributes to the visibility of older people, highlighting their talents and showcasing their contribution to community life.

New policy

The authors stress that additional investment in participatory arts programs for older adults is likely to yield public health benefits in the future.

They urged policy makers to adopt a new health-enhancing framework for older people that includes a national policy for the arts in older age.

ROUNDUP

ELDERS JOIN OCCUPY WALL STREET: [The Council of Elders](#), a newly organized independent group of elder leaders, has expressed its solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement. Among them is:

- Dolores Huerta, co-founder with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers;
- Marian Wright Edelman, the first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar; and
- writer Sister Joan Chittister, author of *The Gift of Years*.

On Nov. 20, 2011, the group joined demonstrators in several U.S. cities for an “Intergenerational Day.”

SEE YOU AT THE CRAFT CAFÉ: Commonly, housing associations organize social activities for older residents, and with good reason.

The Craft Café in Glasgow’s Castlemilk’s housing estate is a thriving social network. The café is funded by Cassiltoun Housing Association and run by the community arts company Impact Arts. Anyone over the age of 50 can drop in to the café and try their hand at:

- drawing;

- painting;
- sewing;
- knitting;
- card making;
- silk painting;
- sculpture; and
- jewellery making.

The place is bustling with activity. According to the staff, local physicians routinely refer their older patients to the café.

Recent work is displayed on the walls and propped against cupboards. The organizers want to partner with a professional gallery to create a formal exhibition for participants.

“I’ve always loved art,” says Hugh Fox, a 69-year-old café regular. “I won a competition when I was a boy and the painting went into an art gallery. Later I worked as a school janitor and in the school at night after I was done I used to paint, and the teachers used to steal them.”

Source: *guardian.co.uk*

PLANNING FOR LIFE WITHOUT THE CAR: Olive Bryanton and her colleagues interviewed 11 women from one county on Prince Edward Island. Participants were in their 80s and evenly split between rural and city settings. The women never thought they would need to stop driving, say researchers from the University of Prince Edward Island.

In hindsight, participants say they would have welcomed a program to help them plan for life after driving, but none was available.

Some of the women developed unique strategies to help maintain their independence:

- one kept her car and hired a couple of neighbours to drive her;
- another sold her car at a reduced price to a family member who agreed to provide transportation; and
- another explored taxi fees and set up an account so she did not have to pay each time she used the taxi.

The researchers reported their findings at the 40th *Annual Scientific and Educational Meeting & Pan Am Congress* in Ottawa (Oct. 21-23, 2011).

MEMOIRS ARE MADE OF THIS: Are you planning to write your memoir and looking for inspiration to get started? [The Memoir Writing Club](#) may be for you.

Writer and photographer Irene Graham has been helping people write their memoirs for 20 years.

Perhaps you are you intimidated by the idea of writing a whole book? Graham has just the idea for you. She calls it mini-memoir. In this format, writers focus on one particular incident or experience in their lives.

Here are some exercises from the author to help you kick-start your memories:

- Who was your best friend at school? Why? What was the biggest mischief you got up to together?
- Think about the best pet you ever had. How did that pet affect your life? What were their three good points and bad points? What adventures did you have together?
- What was your favourite home? Why? Where was it?