

# AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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**Interview:** Over-85s Eager to Support Younger Generation

**Notable Book:** Boomers Keep Rockin'

**Study:** Older Disabled People Ask For Equal Treatment

**Interview:** Music Helps Soldiers On and Off the Battlefield

## Roundup

- Memories of Pier 21
- German Retirees Recreate Classic Movie Scenes
- Silver Separators on the Rise
- The Smithsonian Wants Your Rock 'n' Roll Photos

## Interview: Over-85s Eager to Support Younger Generation

*Civic engagement is growing among older adults as increasing numbers pursue [innovative projects](#) to improve communities.*

*Andreas Kruse and Eric Schmitt from the University of Heidelberg wanted to understand how those over 80 view civic engagement as well as the kinds of opportunities available to them.*

*The results, published in Research in Human Development on April 2, 2015, involved 400 Germans, aged 85 to 99. Roughly, three quarters of the participants lived in their own homes, and two-thirds were female. In addition, the study surveyed 800 employees of voluntary organizations and municipalities, which offered opportunities for civic engagement across Germany.*

*Researchers were surprised by their findings.*

*To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Kruse, director of the Institute for Gerontology at the University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany.*

**Ruth Dempsey:** Your research looked at civic engagement. Why did you want to focus on adults 85 years and older?

**Andreas Kruse:** When we speak about age, the focus is usually on the third age, the years from 65 to 85. The fourth age, or the years after 85, are usually hidden or only considered from a vulnerability perspective.

Does the fourth age equal vulnerability? I wanted to examine this question more closely.

Also, I wanted to use empirical findings to oppose the common assumption that people in the fourth age are not only expensive for society, but they are not able to contribute anything to society.

**RD:** The study found 51 percent of older adults were civically engaged. Did this surprise you?

**AK:** Yes, it did surprise me because when we hear about the fourth age, we invariably hear about the losses.

This is why in the interviews, we asked older people to talk to us about their major concerns. Their concerns were mainly for members of succeeding generations, especially for the younger generation. They wanted to reach out to them and support them.

I find it remarkable that many people at this great old age are motivated to want to do things for other people.

**RD: Many did not differentiate between helping family members and helping members of the community. What did they do for family members?**

**AK:** They provided financial support, and they engaged in very confidential conversations. Giving assistance within the family usually requires greater attention, and it is more sustained.

**RD: What did they do in the community?**

**AK:** Almost half of older people believed their knowledge and experience might be useful to young people. They encouraged the younger generation in their schooling and education. They also supervised play activities for young children.

Very old participants shared emotionally-trusting conversations with friends. They supported neighbours with everyday activities and visited those in need of care. Almost 30 per cent made donations to clubs and voluntary organizations. Some were involved in their church communities.

**RD: What inspired them to get involved?**

**AK:** The majority of older people told us that they found pleasure in warm meaningful encounters with other people, especially the younger generations.

They had three kinds of motivation:

First, they feel the need to reach out to the young and support their development.

Secondly, they want to live on in the future generations, even when they are no longer alive themselves.

And finally, these older citizens feel a responsibility to society and to the planet. In other words, they want to contribute to the world having a future and to successive generations having opportunities to lead a good and successful a life.

**RD: You also asked employees to rate the contribution of two groups: those in the third age (60-84 years) and those in the fourth age (85 years and older). What did you find?**

**AK:** Both groups are committed contributors. In the group of 60 to 84-year-olds, more people are involved in helping others than in the group of 85-year-olds and older.

At the same time, we found a remarkable willingness in over-85s to get involved. People, in this group, focused primarily on the social environment and creating emotionally close relationships.

**RD: What did the study reveal about vulnerability?**

**AK:** The findings show that the fourth age is about *more* than vulnerability. In short: vulnerability and creative life; and vulnerability and commitment to other people are by no means mutually exclusive.

**RD: Overall, employees viewed over-85s less positively. What can be done to build more supportive environments?**

**AK:** I think a change of attitude is essential. We need to respect and value very old people — not only as community members but also as active contributors to civil society.

Moreover, we need to show employees of voluntary organizations that the emotional and spiritual potential of people in the fourth age is considerable.

More concretely, we need social structures that foster open and trusting relationships between the generations, such as:

- community centres
- age-friendly organizations, and
- multi-generational housing.

Very old people point out they need help to be able to get to places where they can meet young people.

Given the right circumstances, older people would have opportunities to share rich conversations with the young about life's big questions, maybe even think about very different forms of spirituality. They would have opportunities to offer encouragement and emotional support. In turn, young people could share their valuable ideas with the old.

The past century has seen remarkable improvements in life expectancy. Our findings suggest this kind of emotional and cognitive engagement increases life satisfaction in very old age. Besides, recognizing the creative wealth of the fourth age could lead to a more caring and inclusive society.

### **Notable Book: Boomers Keep Rockin'**

In his fascinating book *Baby Boomer Rock 'N' Roll Fans: The Music Never Ends*, Joseph Kotarba takes the reader on a voyage across time, showing how the baby boomers — the

first generation raised on rock 'n' roll music — continue to use the rock 'n' roll idiom to make sense of their lives.

This scholarly volume is lively and thought-provoking. Kotarba is a professor in sociology at Texas State University. His book is based on two decades of sociological research and over half a century of fandom.

But this isn't just about music; it's the beat of a generation. Kotarba shows how boomers have used rock to give meaning to their lives - from the early years, becoming parents, through middle age and now as they enter old age.

### Early years

When the Beatles played on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on Feb. 9, 1964, a staggering 73 million viewers tuned in. That Sunday evening, the Fab Four played *All My Loving*, *She Loves You* and *I Want to Hold Your Hand*. Many of the baby boomers were still in grade school. They grew up with rock music as the soundtrack for everyday life.

A few years earlier, when Kotarba was in Grade 8 at St. Turibius School in Chicago, Dion Dimucci was his favourite singer, and *Runaround Sue* his favourite song. His friend Matt liked Bobby Darin. The girls in his class were in love with Frankie Avalon and Neil Sedaka.

In high school, kids danced to Chubby Checker's *The Twist*. Many chose the Beatles' *Yesterday* or Dion's *Abraham, Martin and John* for their class songs.

When the boomers married in the 1960s and 1970s, they introduced popular music into the formal wedding ceremony, ranging from Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* to the Sandpipers' *Come Saturday Morning*.

### Becoming parents

Not surprisingly, the children of the 1950s took the rhythms of the 1960s into the world of parenthood.

According to Kotarba, rock 'n' roll integrates families and serves as a bridge across generations by allowing children, adolescents and adults to communicate and share meanings.

Rock 'n' roll, for instance, helped create bonds between mothers and daughters. In the '60s, they shared Frankie Avalon and the Beatles, and Neil Diamond in the 1970s. Later, their interest shifted to female rock 'n' roll performers such as Madonna, Carrie Underwood and Beyonce.

Dads, who learned to play the guitar as teenagers, taught their sons how to play. Fans of bands like the Grateful Dead brought their sons to festivals and sported their deadhead T-shirts.

Unlike many other musical genres, boomer rock 'n' roll attracts audiences that include two and even three generations. Concert tickets are a welcome gift for the teenagers in the family, and music is a great gift for birthdays and special occasions.

### **Middle years**

The rock 'n' roll idiom continued to help boomers make sense of their lives in middle age.

Take for instance when punk poet and singer Patti Smith performed a concert in Houston on March 28, 2003 at the beginning of the war in Iraq, her poetry and music hit a chord with the large number of middle-aged people in the audience. Growing up in a time of political change, they had learned their politics from Jim Hendrix and the Grateful Dead. Now, Smith gave them a way to channel their overwhelmingly negative feelings about the war.

In 2006, Kotarba attended his first Van Morrison concert at the Austin City Limits music festival with his wife, Polly. They arrived an hour early. Men and women in their 50s and 60s quickly filled the area in front of the main stage with their lawn chairs. That evening, Morrison led a fabulous band. He played more saxophone than usual, to the delight of fans who had listened to him for 30 odd years.

In midlife, fewer people had time to attend live concerts. Electronic companies marketed rock 'n' roll to boomers on their computers, smartphones, iPods and other devices. One 62-year-old manager said his iPod reminded him of his old-fashioned transistor radio: "I take my iPod with me everywhere I go, like a radio. . . ."

### **Into old age**

Many rock and roll musicians who performed for baby boomers 40 or 50 year ago are still performing professionally like the Rolling Stones and Van Halen.

Bobby, a 65-year-old city worker, still views the Mitchell Pavilion in Woodlands, Texas, as sacred:

This is where I first saw the Rolling Stones play. It was in 1966, I believe. Man, what a trip! We sat up on the hill, no blankets, no nothing . . . The place was like magic. It was unusually cool and breezy. You could just lay back and watch the stars as Mick [Jagger] acted the fool. You know, you would always go to concerts back then to meet chicks. That night with the Stones — you just needed to be there.

Last October, Bob Dylan crooned mostly new songs from his recent albums to devoted fans at Royal Albert Hall in London. He first played there 50 years ago during his final solo acoustic tour.

Also, in October, Paul McCarthy and a stellar band delivered 41 songs — old and new — during a three-hour marathon at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto. The estimated crowd of 18,000 joined in with *Hey Jude*.

As more boomers hit retirement, the rock 'n' roll cruise industry is flourishing. Some cruise lines report long wait lists.

In 2015, fans bade a sad farewell to great artists like Cory Wells of Three Dog Night, Lynn Anderson and the British legend Cilla Black, among others.

Meanwhile, the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards is hinting the band may be getting back together to work on a new album. It has been 10 years since the Stones released their last album.

Recently Richards, 71, told the *Sunday Times Magazine*: "It's my turn for growing old. I never thought I'd get to this far. Now, I have to think about this and wonder what to do with it. I don't know, man."

## **Study: Older Disabled People Ask For Equal Treatment**

Older Canadians with disabilities are failing to get the support they need, according to a new Québec study.

The three-year research project examined participation from the perspective of older people with disabilities. The study sought to understand how people with lifelong physical disabilities viewed their participation in society and how they went about initiating change.

The Photo-Novel Project was initiated and implemented by Carrefour familial des personnes handicapées, a local community group in Québec City, Canada.

Émilie Raymond and Amanda Grenier reported their findings in the December 2015 issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies*.

### **The Photo-Novel Project**

How did the project work?

The project drew on the everyday experiences of 12 older people with physical disabilities, including three paraplegics and one quadriplegic, several people with hearing and/or visual impairments and one person born with cerebral paralysis.

To start, the participants created fictionalized accounts of their everyday lives. These individual stories were then rolled into a collective fictionalized account, transformed into a series of short graphic novels and produced as a glossy magazine. This magazine was distributed to organizations working with older people and people with disabilities.

As a second step, the participants shared accounts of their everyday lives with policy-makers and members of the public in a series of events organized by Carrefour.

## **Participation**

The new research showed that participants' impairments did not prevent them from becoming professionals, having families and engaging in a wide range of social and educational activities.

As Réal explained:

When we see a person with disabilities that did something good or achieved a goal, we consider him or her a superman or a superwoman. But in fact, this is just normal. This person has a job, a partner, a family and succeeds to cope with life almost like everybody else. . . . There is nothing extraordinary about that.

Two visually-impaired participants demonstrated how they used technical aids to engage in mainstream life. They emphasized the aids are only a small part of their life.

Several noted the needs they shared with older people in general, such as the need to maintain healthy habits. "You can do something by yourselves to stay in shape. You can eat well, exercise, not smoke," Rachel said. "There is something to do to age well"

## **On the margins**

At the same time, the participants reported feeling marginalized, excluded from mainstream activities and a burden on society.

Even the need for accommodation in everyday activities was considered burdensome. For instance, Lise was excluded from volunteering because the person in charge found it too complicated to accommodate her hearing impairment.

The study found several examples of how participants' physical impairments prevented them from accessing senior activities in the community. A sound system for the hearing impaired may be required, or playing cards may be adapted for visual impairments.

"It is just not accepted," one participant said. "We are being told to stay in our [disability] associations."

## **A call to action**

These older people claim participation is essential to engaged citizenship and an active social life. They want to be treated as persons, first — not simply reduced to their disabilities.

They are demanding community awareness-raising activities to foster more inclusive communities. "We need awareness-raising campaigns to say that a person with disabilities is a full citizen," stated one group. "She is not only a wheelchair."

Moreover, researchers argue healthy habits and engaged citizenship in late life are not just individual responsibilities. Social structures are needed to foster participation and bolster personal agency.

The new research concluded that environmental barriers to participation must be eliminated on a societal level if older people with disabilities are to experience genuine citizenship and meaningful participation.

### **Interview: Music Helps Soldiers On and Off the Battlefield**

*Kip Pegley grew up in a musical household. Her father, who served in the Canadian navy, loved music. After doing research in numerous fields, Pegley says she feels like she is returning home, as she explores the therapeutic benefits of music for Canadian military personnel.*

*Her study appeared in the November 2015 issue of the Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health.*

To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Pegley in the school of drama and music at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., Canada.

**RD:** You say neurologists are beginning to better understand what happens when we listen to music. How so?

**KP:** Research on the brain has grown exponentially over the last number of years. As a result, we are coming to understand more about how the brain processes music, as well as the relationship between music and memory.

We have known for a long time that music affects us emotionally, but now we have the capacity to measure physiological changes to our bodies when exposed to particular types of music. This can now be done, for instance, by examining our hair follicles, and so we have a much more efficient and quicker way of measuring how our bodies change when we hear a song that triggers memory.

Indeed, recently researchers have reported that music can be even more effective in reducing anxiety before surgery than many benzodiazepines. Not surprisingly, there is

now increased interest in how music can be used therapeutically and even replace other forms of medical treatment.

**RD: Your study looked at how Canadian troops used music to manage the pressures of deployment. What did you learn?**

**KP:** I knew that music was important for many of the troops, but I had no idea the extent to which many of them relied upon music. As one veteran told me, "I rationed water, food and my iPod battery."

Many listened to music with headphones in barracks as they prepared to go into conflict. This helped them focus and prepare mentally.

Soldiers also listened to music when they were "outside the wire." Many Afghanistan veterans were off base for days and even weeks at a time. Many reported living in exposed areas under constant threat of attack for weeks on end. Music allowed them to create a perceived barrier and allow their nervous systems to find some temporary relief.

I believe this was crucial for many soldiers in avoiding or reducing PTSD. This condition often results from threat and constant hyperarousal. Listening to music was an important strategy for staving off PTSD.

**RD: What about musical taste? What songs did they have on their playlist?**

**KP:** Soldiers reported listening to a wide range of music, from rock to country and pop to gospel tunes.

Quite often, mass media depicts soldiers as preferring heavy metal and rap over all others and, certainly, they listened to these genres. One favourite song for many of my interviewees was *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by the American rock band Deep Blue Something. This is a very fun and uplifting song, one that many of them enjoyed singing together. This is not a song many would expect them to enjoy, and it speaks to the range of the soldiers' musical preferences.

**RD: How did soldiers listen to music when they returned home?**

**KP:** Returning soldiers used music in very different ways.

For a number of my interviewees, music became a lifeline. Upon returning home, a number of soldiers felt as though they were continuing to be under attack. Some even described their own family members as unrecognizable. Music provided a constant in their life.

Many returned to listening to songs they enjoyed before their deployment, and this gave them deep comfort.

Some, struggling with PTSD turned to low-arousal music, slower tempos, gentler musical timbres and so on. This helped their nervous systems calm down.

Others, listened to the music they heard during their deployment as a way to feel connected to their colleagues. For many deployed soldiers, their colleagues are like family. The experiences they endured together created a significant bond.

So, as you see, music functioned very differently for a range of soldiers.

**RD: This is the first study to examine the therapeutic benefits of music for Canadian soldiers. How might music be used in the future?**

**KP:** For one thing, I would like to see music given to soldiers to help them relax and cope with the stressors of deployment.

And because we now recognize the impact of music on our physiology and can measure that impact, why not use it to help soldiers in advance of their deployments?

What about using music as a therapeutic tool to help soldiers get back in touch — and perhaps resolve — difficult traumatic memories upon the return home?

Quite often in my interviews soldiers would tell me that they probably had very little to say. But once we started to talk about particular songs that were important to them during their deployment, the memory floodgates started to open. I found it amazing. Through music, soldiers could remember events with surprising detail and access the emotions associated with those memories.

Music is hugely under-utilized as a mode for understanding soldiers' relationships to and memories of war.

## ROUNDUP

**MEMORIES OF PIER 21:** Does Pier 21 hold special memories for you or maybe a loved one?

Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was the gateway to Canada for some one million immigrants between 1928 and 1971. Today the unassuming brick building is the [Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21](#).

This National Historic Site is a reminder of the how immigrants have shaped Canada's character. Cozy cubbies, scattered throughout the museum, allow visitors to watch and hear first-hand stories from people who came here from countries around the globe.

The museum also explores the history of the vessels that carried newcomers to Halifax, including a reconstructed ship's dining cart with sample menus.

"The most important part of the museum's collection is our oral history," says Kristine Kovacevic, the museum's interpretation and visitor experience manager. "Our real focus is on people's experiences and stories."

**GERMAN RETIREES RECREATE CLASSIC MOVIE SCENES:** Older adults from a German retirement residence won online fame when they recreated favourite movie scenes for a calendar.

The actors hail from the Contilia Retirement Centre in Essen, Germany. Ranging from 76 to 98, they donned their movie star garb, and dazzled residents, employees and family members, with their energy, style and aplomb.

Marianne Brunsbach, 86, put on her little black dress and pearls and posed as Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. And 89-year-old Wilhelm Buiting channeled a spy named Bond.

A professional photographer from Gladbeck caught the action. The result: 12 winning motifs for the centre's vintage calendar.

Movie choices included:

- *Easy Rider*
- *Titanic*
- *Cabaret*, and
- *Saturday Night Fever*.

Copies of the calendar were printed and distributed to family, friends and staff. According to one Contilia board member, once pictures from the calendar started circulating online, the leading women and men won hearts around the world.

**THE RISE OF THE SILVER SEPARATOR:** Divorce rates for people over-50 are on the rise, while rates have plateaued or dropped among other age groups.

So why are over-50s topping the divorce charts?

1. "Silver" divorce is becoming more common, and more acceptable. According to Statistics Canada, the proportion of divorced or separated seniors who are 65 and older has tripled in the last three decades, up from four per cent in 1981 to 12 per cent by 2011.
2. More women are financially independent. Nonetheless, because women tend to live longer and still earn less than men, they face greater economic risk on their own, according to Susan Brown, a professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

3. Many older adults are in second marriages; the divorce rate is about two and a half times larger for those who have remarried.

4. Life expectancy is also a factor. Individuals who are 50 or 60 today, could go 30 more years. Many want the chance to have a more satisfying and loving relationship. According to John-Paul Boyd from the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family, boomers are more likely than any previous generation to be married two or more times, to have been in long-term unmarried relationships and to divorce later in life.

**THE SMITHSONIAN WANTS YOUR ROCK 'N' ROLL PHOTOS:** If you've got some rock star photos on your computer hard drive, stored on your iPhone or hidden in your attic, the Smithsonian wants to hear from you.

"Send us your Jimi Hendrix pictures. Your Patti Smith shots. Your Radiohead photos. We want rock 'n' roll as seen through your eyes," read a recent press release from the famous American museum.

Smithsonian Books and Smithsonian Media want to create one of the greatest collections of rock 'n' roll photography ever. An accompanying book featuring the best images will be published in 2017.

For more details, and to submit your photos, go to [rockandroll.si.edu](http://rockandroll.si.edu).

Finally, we at *Aging Horizons Bulletin* want to wish all our wonderful readers many blessings in 2016! — *Ruth Dempsey*