

AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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Interview: Australia's Grey Nomads

Australia's "grey nomads" climb into motor homes and head for warmer climes during the winter months.

They are retirees who migrate north at the beginning of winter and return south with the onset of spring. Some just keep on going and tour for years at a time, ending up wherever.

Sociologist Wendy Hillman caught up with the freewheeling travellers at a popular coastal caravan park in Queensland, Australia. There, over a two-month period, the grey nomads told her stories of adventure, learning, new friendships and improved health.

Hillman published her findings in the journal Aging & Society on April 12, 2012.

AHB reached Dr. Hillman at CQUniversity Australia in Rockhampton, Queensland.

Ruth Dempsey: What attracts grey nomads to the open highway?

Wendy Hillman: In the interviews, they stressed the benefits of travel: exploring Australia and learning about its geography and culture. And they welcomed opportunities for recreation and relaxation and for stopovers with friends and relations.

Grey nomads structure their journeys to suit their particular needs. They enjoy lively leisure activities with a clear emphasis on happiness and vitality.

RD: How do they cover travel costs?

WH: All of the grey nomads I interviewed were retirees. Most had finished paying off their mortgages. This is a big part of Australian life, where home ownership rates are amongst the highest in the world.

Once they have bought the large purchases like the caravan and the four wheel drive (RV), they only have to cover the cost of petrol, car registration, tires, and, of course, food.

As retirees, they are able to live quite frugally on their pensions, especially if they fish or catch crustaceans, such as lobster or crab, to eat.

Australia has universal health care coverage so the cost of medical visits and prescription drugs are relatively cheap for older adults.

RD: So what are some of their favourite activities?

WH: Fishing tops the list. I believe lawn bowls comes a close second, but bush walking, sight-seeing, visiting museums and historical sites also rate high on their list.

Also important is making friends along the way and the fantastic camaraderie at caravan parks.

One woman said she found the caravan park very social, very welcoming and very inclusive. Many play sports with fellow travellers. Get-togethers such as BBQs, afternoon tea and campfires are highly anticipated and well attended.

"Happy Hour" is a main event on the daily calendar as old friends and new acquaintances share gossip, travel tales and tips on where to go.

Other scheduled events include "Christmas in July" and group trips to local restaurants.

RD: Many talked of health concerns yet they travelled thousands of kilometres in the Australian outback . . .

WH: This is true. One study found that five per cent of grey nomads have faced a medical emergency while on the road. Some of these incidents included falls resulting in broken arms and damaged knees.

Another experienced an attack of kidney stones while travelling in a remote location.

Indeed, 14 per cent of participants in the study had problems of various kinds. Back injuries, deep vein thrombosis, fainting spells, pneumonia, severe arthritis and chest pains, to mention a few.

In all these cases, local doctors and regional hospitals provided treatment.

In my study, several nomads talked about having supportive physicians at home, who helped them plan for contingencies. For example, one couple said their doctor gave them written information to share with medical practitioners in case of an emergency.

RD: How do they tackle mechanical breakdown?

WH: Usually, when one person pulls off to the side of the road with a problem, it's not long before another grey nomad stops to help them. It appears to be the road lore, they help one another, and they are happy to do so. Many grey nomads are also "bush mechanics".

RD: What about family and friends back home?

WH: All of the grey nomads I interviewed were in contact with their home base. Many phoned their families on a weekly basis to get the latest news. Others checked for reassurance their houses and gardens were safe.

Many used the Internet, Facebook and Skype to speak to their grandchildren. Others kept in regular contact through e-mail.

RD: So, what stands out for you about the grey nomads?

WH: As a group, the grey nomads find fulfillment and adventure in journeying around Australia. They do not think of their lives as dull, boring and over.

Along the way, they develop long-lasting friendships and enduring social networks.

They use modern technology to stay up-to-date with the world, and in touch with family, friends and especially grandchildren.

As Australia has an aging population, the expectation that there will be many more grey nomads out on the roads every year is not just a possibility, it will be an eventuality.

These older adults have a sense of freedom and adventure. They are fun-loving free spirits. They revel in the thrill and challenge of the open road.

Study: Canadians Turn to Paid Companions for Home Care

A new study has found that financially-secure Canadians hire paid companions for home care and support in long-term facilities. Meanwhile, low-income Canadians face limited care options.

According to the UBC Centre for Health Services and Policy Research, the percentage of adults aged 65 and over, who received home health services, declined from 13 to nine per cent from 1995 to 2005.

To fill the gap, Canadians have resorted to paid companions, specifically home-based and facility-based companions.

Linda Outcalt conducted the study as part of the MA degree program at the University of Victoria in Victoria, B.C.

The new research examined the use of paid companions by older adults in the Greater Victoria and Sidney areas of B.C.

The findings appeared in the *Canadian Journal on Aging* (Vol. 32, No. 1. 2013).

Home-based companions

Outcalt interviewed eight adults, 62 to 96 years of age, as part of a larger study. The six females and two males employed paid companions because of physical health problems and because they wanted to remain in their own homes.

The participants hired their own companions — mostly women in their 50s and 60s — either through a private agency or by word of mouth.

These paid companions provided a wide range of services such as:

- personal care
- light housekeeping
- meal preparation
- transportation
- laundry and ironing
- computer assistance
- pet care
- gardening
- respite, and
- palliative care.

According to the study, the participants required two to 70 hours of service per week (two to seven days per week).

In 2010, salaries for paid companions working for private home care agencies cost an average of \$13 per hour. Wages for independent companions (those not attached to an agency) were somewhat higher with an average hourly rate of \$20.

The study also revealed the inclusion of "paid" in the title of paid companion had a negative connotation for many older adults.

Participants preferred to use of other terms such as personal assistant, home care worker or friend.

Moreover and importantly, the research showed the "companion-relationship" was crucial, taking precedence over domestic tasks. In other words, social and emotional support trumped practical assistance for older adults.

Facility-based companions

As well, the study suggests families are increasingly hiring paid companions to support relatives living in assisted living or long-term-care facilities.

One private home care administrator gave this example:

We had one family request where they wanted someone to take their mum to the recreation room so she could be involved, because the people in the facility were so busy that if their mum was too slow getting out of bed, they would move on to the next person. So she would miss out on stuff . . .

Facility-based companions provide one-on-one support mostly for older adults with dementia.

This includes:

- visits and conversation
- reading and walks
- music
- outings in the community, and
- assistance with feeding.

The companions spent one to two hours with participants on each visit, and they usually saw them two to five times per week.

The demand for support is likely to increase.

According to the Alzheimer's Society of Canada, nearly 750,000 Canadians currently live with dementia or Alzheimer's, and the number will increase to nearly 1.5 million by 2031.

Little support for families

The new study is one of the first to examine the emergence of paid companions in Canada.

The findings suggest the development of paid companions in B.C. has been fuelled by the failure of governments to adequately fund home care.

In the meantime, families struggle to pick up the caring roles that the state has abandoned.

Interview: Gay Liberation Pioneers Show Resilience in Aging

As the men who fought for public acceptance of homosexuality reach old age, a new study has found them lead satisfying and hopeful lives.

The research draws on data from a nation-wide community-based online survey involving 840 gay Australian men. The data was collected between November 2010 and April 2011. The men ranged in age from 40 to 78 years of age.

Anthony Lyons, lead author of the study, is a research fellow at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

The findings were published online in the journal Research on Aging on May 3, 2012.

To learn more, AHB reached Dr. Lyons in Melbourne.

Ruth Dempsey: What percentage of the older population is gay?

Anthony Lyons: This is not an easy question to answer, but it is probably somewhere between two and seven per cent. For one thing, finding reliable data is difficult, and the results often depend on how the question is asked.

To give you an example, in 2003, the Australian Study of Health and Relationships surveyed a large nationally representative population of men. When these men were asked for their sexual identity, 2.5 per cent identified as homosexual. But when they were asked who they felt sexually attracted to, nearly seven per cent said they felt attracted to men at least some or all of the time.

But relying on the most conservative of estimates, we can say that health and social services are likely to encounter many thousands of older gay men in countries such as Australia and Canada in the near future.

RD: About half the men in the study were in an ongoing relationship. Is that right?

AL: That's right. There were no differences between men in their 40s and those 60 and older. In other words, men over 60 were just as likely to be in an ongoing relationship as those in midlife.

Gay communities are often perceived to be highly youth oriented, and it is commonly assumed that as gay men age they find it harder to attract partners and are more likely to be single. This was clearly not the case in our study.

RD: How did men rate their overall well-being?

AL: A majority of the men reported feeling good or excellent, but there were still large numbers who reported feeling poor or very poor.

RD: What factors contributed to their sense of well-being?

AL: Our study identified three critical factors: good health, social support and sexual satisfaction.

Simply put, having good physical health, feeling high levels of social support and having a satisfying sex life were most predictive of overall well-being.

Interestingly, age was not a factor. Men in our study, aged 60 and older reported similar levels of well-being to those who were in their 40s and 50s.

But we don't know whether the presence of these factors *caused* men to feel better about their lives. Perhaps men with high levels of well-being are better at seeking out social support or at engaging in activities that improve their health. We need more research.

However, based on what we know about well-being more generally, it's likely that improving physical health, providing greater support, and assisting men to improve sexual satisfaction can make a *real* difference in their lives.

Here it's worth noting that sexual satisfaction featured highly. This finding counters assumptions that sex is less important to older people.

In fact, in our study men in their 60s and older were just as sexually active as those in their 40s and 50s. Almost two-thirds reported having sex in the past month, with one-third having sex six or more times.

RD: About half of older men faced age discrimination. This seems high.

AL: Yes, 49 per cent reported age-related discrimination in the past two years.

While this may seem high, there is a wide range of potential sources of age-related discrimination for these men.

Some may experience discrimination in the workplace, for example, or when they come into contact with health and support services. These are common sources of discrimination for both gay and heterosexual men.

Additionally, some older gay men may encounter age discrimination within the gay community. Some aspects of the community, such as the “gay scene”, can sometimes favour the young over the old.

So, education strategies to prevent ageism should probably target society as a whole for maximum effect.

RD: Many men lost friends and lovers during the HIV epidemic . . .

AL: Today, HIV is largely a treatable chronic condition. At least in high-income countries, HIV no longer poses the death sentence that it once did.

However, some of these men were adults during the earliest years of the epidemic. And they are likely to have lost friends to HIV/AIDS.

The psychological impact is potentially huge, but few studies have been done.

Many of the current generation of older gay men were pioneers in the gay liberation movement. They were at the forefront of campaigns for public acceptance of homosexuality in the 1970s.

Back then, discrimination in countries like Australia and Canada was far more widespread than it is today. Surviving those years would have required some resilience.

In any case, our study looked only at men who were not infected with HIV. The fact that self-esteem was highest among older men indicates many have coped well.

For some, it is even possible that the difficult years during the HIV epidemic gave them skills to cope with the challenges of old age.

For example, crisis competence theory, suggests gay men (and other sexual minorities and stigmatized populations) develop skills from lifelong stigma that help them resist ageism.

RD: So how do they see their future?

AL: We asked the men to rate the degree to which they believed their future would be better or worse in five years. A majority believed their future would be better or at least no worse.

Overall, older men were less positive than men in their 40s and 50s. This is perhaps not surprising given that the older men were more likely to be facing age-related health problems.

RD: Finally, what are the implications of the findings for health and social services?

AL: In the past, aged care and other health services had less contact with older gay men, not because these men did not exist, but because they were more likely to have concealed their sexual orientation. Some may have even been in heterosexual marriages for all or almost all of their lives.

Today and increasingly into the future, many older gay men are unlikely to want to conceal their sexual orientation, and concealment may be difficult anyway if they have same-sex partners, as many of them do.

While the similarities between gay and heterosexual men far outweigh the differences, gay men do have unique issues that services should be ready to address.

For one thing, there is the potential for sexual discrimination. This may come from clinicians and other health and social service professionals, but is perhaps even more likely from fellow patients, clients or residents in aged-care facilities.

Health and social services should develop strategies to prevent discrimination as well as protocols for handling actual cases.

Older gay men may also encounter legal and institutional barriers not faced by heterosexual men, such as being denied hospital visitation rights or complications with inheritance from a deceased partner. These are big challenges that require considerable support.

On a more positive note, our findings suggest many gay men are relatively resilient and lead lives that are satisfying and hopeful.

This is certainly not the case for all older gay men, but the fact that social support emerged as such a strong factor for well-being suggests health and social services can potentially play a powerful role in enhancing the mental health and well-being of older gay men.

Study: Marriage: Older Adults Calling it Quits

The chances of being old and newly single are increasing.

In the past 20 years, the divorce rate for those over 50 has doubled in the United States according to new research by Susan Brown and I-Fen Lin of Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

In 2010, roughly one in four people getting divorces were aged 50 or older: in 1990, that number was one in 10.

Although the overall divorce rate is holding steady, the rate of "grey divorce" is rising sharply.

The odds of divorce are 12 per cent higher for women than men.

And based on current trends, researchers predict the number of divorces for people over 50 could top 800,000 in 2030.

The study, *The Grey Divorce Revolution*, was published online in *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Science and Social Sciences* on Oct. 9, 2012.

So what's going on?

The rise in late-life divorce is a product of dramatic shifts in the meaning of marriage over the last-half century.

One 2007 Canadian study suggests we live in an era of individualized marriage. So today, those who wed expect marriage to provide them not simply with stability and security, but also with self-fulfillment and personal satisfaction.

In Ottawa, the chief executive officer of the Vanier Institute of the Family told [CTV Ottawa News](#), that part of the decision to divorce after so many years is based on the fact we're living longer.

"So you've got more time to think about what kind of companion do I want to have in those last 20 years of life," Nora Spinks said. "What kind of caregiving do I want to give and what do I want to receive."

Spink's remarks echo findings by Deirdre Bair, biographer of Carl Jung, Simone de Beauvoir and Samuel Beckett. Bair interviewed 126 men and 184 women for her 2007 book *Calling it Quits: Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over* (Random House).

Bair, whose own marriage ended in divorce after 43 years, talked to ex-wives, ex-husbands and their adult children. They answered questions about how they had come to believe divorce was their only option.

Most of the participants were in their 50s, but they ranged in age up to 85. Some were ending 40-year and even 60-year marriages.

The interviews revealed marriage splits were motivated less frequently by secret affairs as they were by such intangibles as "freedom," or "more control" over their lives.

The author found some men and women abandoned long-term marriages because they "could not go on living the same old life in the same old rut with the same old boring person."

Mindful of the clock ticking down, participants wanted a chance to live a more satisfying life in their later years, even when it meant less financial security.

"It's my time and if I don't take it now, I never will" was a statement Bair heard often.

ROUNDUP

NEW JOB SERVICE FOR OLDER CANADIANS: Surveys of Canadian organizations have shown many older adults want to stay part of the labour force.

ThirdQuarter.ca is an online job service for mature Canadians.

The service was launched in 2010 as a pilot project by the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce. It was designed to match experienced workers with employers in the region who needed positions filled.

It was so successful that last year the federal government's Economic Action Plan 2012 provided \$6 million over three years to expand the ThirdQuarter project across the country.

The Winnipeg-based organization helps Canadians who are retiring or are retired to find interesting full-time, part-time, contract or seasonal work.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO THE SEVENTH GENERATION: In *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (Allen Lane), George Monbiot examines the astonishing capacity of nature to rebound. He argues "rewilding" is key to reversing the destruction of the natural world.

Rewilding is about restoring damaged ecosystems on land by reintroducing missing animals and plants, taking down the fences, blocking the drainage ditches and standing back and letting nature repair itself.

Put another way, rewilding is about the restoration and protection of life's support system on which the welfare of current and future generations depends.

[Monbiot](#) highlights several successful programmes in Europe such as Trees for Life in Scotland and the Wales Wild Land Foundation in the U.K.

[Trees for Life](#) is an awarding-winning charity working to restore Scotland's ancient Caledonian Forest to a wilderness region of mountains and glens. In recent years, volunteers from all over the world have planted a million trees. Their goal is to plant a second million over the next five years.

A smaller scale project is transforming the Liberty Village neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada' largest city. Residents, businesses, local organizations and institutions are coming together to plant native trees, shrubs and butterfly-friendly flowers and grow gardens in yards, roofs, streets and alleyways.

Spearheaded by the David Suzuki Foundation, the [Homegrown National Project](#) hopes to create delightful places across the city, one neighbourhood at a time.

SENIOR ORCHESTRAS: Vivienne Reid and Aidan McDaid are two of five flautists in the Newpark Senior Orchestra, which gave its first public performance on May 28, 2013 in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Orchestra leader, Niall O'Brien arranged the music for a lively tango called *El Tordo (The Thrush)* by David E. Stone. It included harp, accordion, guitar, as well as a full range of classical orchestral standards.

There are dozens of senior orchestras in existence across Ireland. The only requirement for members is that they bring their own instruments, so many rent instruments.

Reid, who worked as a health-care professional, played piano and organ as a student. She started playing the flute for the first time when she retired.

McDaid, a former civil servant, had no experience with music until his late-50s, when his daughter's love of the flute sparked his interest.

"When you discover something late in life it's quite dramatic," he said. "It's like someone giving up smoking: you become enthusiastic, evangelical, trying to convert everyone you meet."

The senior orchestras are part of an initiative funded by the [Arts and Health Partnership](#) to promote participation in the arts by older people.

Source: *irishtimes.com*

SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS: SpiritualityandPractice.com has launched a new project on elder spirituality.

The multifaith site is offering a series of short interactive e-courses with spiritual teachers.

This fall, internationally renowned spiritual guide Joan Chittister will lead an e-course on the gift of years. (For a review of her book *The Gift of Years*, see AHB Nov/Dec 2008).

The fall lineup also features renowned storyteller Christina Baldwin, who will lead a retreat on harvesting memories and telling your story.

"We believe that now is the right time to proclaim that getting older can be an exciting and rewarding spiritual adventure," said co-director Mary Ann Brussat.

The website is also hosting a wide variety of resources for older adults.

Among them:

- a blog on everyday spirituality
- collections of prayers, proverbs and inspirational quotes, and
- reviews of books, DVDs and audios for and about elders.