

# AHB Celebrates 50 Issues

## AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

November/December 2013

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## **Interview: The Granddad Program: Enhancing the Bonds Between Generations**

*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 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, the National Centre for Lifelong Learning at Jönköping University in Sweden.*

*The article appeared online in the Journal of Intergenerational Relationships on Aug. 30, 2011.*

*AHB reached 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:** 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 to 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: So 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: What do teachers appreciate most about the class granddad?**

**AKB:** 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?**

**AKB:** 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?**

**AKB:** 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?**

**AKB:** 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?**

**AKB:** 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.

*Editor's note: This article first appeared in the January/February 2012 issue of AHB.*

## **Study: Filipino Migrants Transform Care**

*Migrant workers are increasingly hired as caregivers for older adults in Canada and in industrialized countries around the world.*

*Medical anthropologist Keren Mazuz (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel) recently described a unique practice among Filipinas working in Israel. As live-in caregivers for the dying, the workers use folding paper swans as a tool to organize the day and to transform care.*

*Mazuz observed Filipina caregivers at the homes of 30 Israeli patients in a town in southern Israel. She reported her findings online in the Medical Anthropology Quarterly on June 20, 2013.*

### **Lori**

Lori, a 39-year-old married woman and mother of four children in the Philippines, is part of a huge contingent of female workers known in Israel as Filipinas. Most migrants are uneducated Catholic women from the country's poor rural areas. All of them support their families by sending money back to the Philippines.

The women obtain temporary contracts to care for dying patients for a monthly salary of from US\$500 to \$800. Contracts are arranged by local placement agencies that charge a fee of almost US\$5000 to cover migration procedures. The fee is paid by all the migrants from their first year's salaries.

On their day off, the women share rented apartments in Tel Aviv where they provide care and support to one another in their own Tagalog language.

### **Sarah**

Sarah, a 75-year-old widow with seven grown children, emigrated from Iraq in the 1950s and settled in Israel with her family. She suffered from Alzheimer's disease and muscular dystrophy.

By the time Lori arrived to care for Sarah, she had already lost her ability to move, eat or identify the people around her.

Often when Sarah's children visited, they showed Sarah's old photos and shared stories of their mother.

## Swans

According to the author, the craft of folding paper swans stemmed spontaneously from the interaction between the Filipina caregivers and their Israeli patients. Their specific swan-folding technique is unique to Filipinas in Israel. On their days off, the migrant workers learned the skill from each other.

The women constructed the swans as part of their daily routine of caregiving. They made the swans from pieces of recycled paper folded into triangles. Some of the patient's families collected paper and bought glue. The differently coloured swans ranged in length from about 30 to 60cm.

The caregivers gave the completed swans as gifts to the patients' families or the placement agency.

## Caring and folding

Mazuz observed Lori's care-giving practices at Sarah's home. Here is part of one of her reports:

When I arrived, Lori was already awake, bending over Sarah's bed, positioning the pillows under Sarah's back and connecting her feeding tube to the nutritional drink Osmolite.

Afterward, Lori sat next to me at the dining table, took a bag containing pieces of paper and opened it. "Until now, I folded only 150 triangles and I need to fold more; I want a medium swan," she said. Lori had learned to fold paper swans in Israel from her friend Judith, who had also migrated from the Philippines.

She took out smooth white papers and drew 10 rectangles on each paper according to the shape of her telephone card. She drew the rectangles and then approached Sarah, saying, "You finished the bag," and disconnected Sarah's feeding tube and checked her diaper. Lori returned to the table and continued to draw more rectangles precisely

according to the card stencil. When she finished drawing on 10 sheets, she cut out the shapes along the lines she had drawn.

The author goes on:

After cutting the rectangles, [Lori] approached Sarah, disconnected the feeding tube, turned her onto her back, moistened her hands with cream, and massaged Sarah's hands slowly and gently. Then she cut Sarah's fingernails, returned to the table and continued cutting rectangles until late in the evening. We made an appointment for the next day.

### **New form of care**

According to the author, the marginalized Filipina workers used the ritual of swan-folding as a coping mechanism. The ritual helped them to deal with the changing circumstances brought on by caring for a dying older person.

Within the cocoon of the patients' homes, the women used simple paper and glue to establish a rhythm of caring and folding that encompassed both the dying patient and healthy caregiver.

By synchronizing the two worlds of folding and caring into one set of consecutive practices, the Filipinas transformed the caregiver-patient relationship. The caregiver was no longer dealing with a dying person but rather with life through the creation of the swan.

### **No more swans**

And so, for five years during the day, Lori moved between Sarah's needs and the swan folding. In March 2008, Sarah passed away during the night as Lori watched by her bed.

From that moment on, Lori stopped making swans.

After the patient dies, according to Israel's immigration procedures, the migrant caregiver becomes illegal, eligible either for reassignment to another patient or for deportation to the Philippines.

## **Interview: Learning Boosts Brain Health in Retirement**

*A Canadian study examines cognitive function in recent retirees and finds that new learning keeps our brain sharp and adds zest to life.*

*"The idea is to prevent the brain from developing lazy habits," said Lawrence Baer, lead author and a PhD candidate in psychology at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec, Canada.*

*The findings appeared online in the Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences on Dec.3, 2012.*

*To learn more, AHB caught up with Mr. Baer in Montreal.*

**Ruth Dempsey:** The research looked at cognitive function in recent retirees. Why focus on this group?

**Lawrence Baer:** The period immediately following retirement can be a time of profound and far-reaching change in a person's life.

The routines of everyday life are disrupted, income levels may decline. And the externally imposed structure of life in the workplace and the social camaraderie are lost.

It can be a challenge to adjust, but it can also be a wonderful opportunity to establish new routines and launch novel pursuits.

This period may also coincide with the first noticeable signs of normal age-related declines in physical health and cognitive function.

So, we wanted to understand how cognitive function changed during this period and to identify factors that might put an individual at risk for cognitive decline as well as the factors that might offer protection.

**RD:** Can you give me a thumbnail sketch of the study?

**LB:** The research is part of the Concordia University Longitudinal Retirement Project undertaken by myself, Nassim Tabri, Mervin Blair and Dorothea Bye under the leadership of senior researchers Dolores Pushkar

and Karen Ki, all members of Concordia's Centre for Research in Human Development.

We were very lucky to have the cooperation of Hydro-Québec and the Provincial Association of Retirees of Hydro-Québec recruiting 446 individuals in the first year of a four-year project that looked at a large variety of biological, psychological and social factors. The participants were recent retirees with an average age of 59 years.

We added a measure of overall cognitive function in the third year. We also analyzed data from the 333 individuals who continued on to the fourth year of the study, when we measured cognitive function a second time.

So we had a snapshot of participants' cognitive status in year three of the study and a measure of change in cognitive status from year three to year four.

**RD: The findings are interesting. For instance, retirees who engaged in a variety of activities showed better cognitive function.**

**LB:** That's right. The greater the variety of cognitive activities engaged in at year two, the better cognitive performance at year three.

However, there was no association between the variety of cognitive activities and change in cognitive status from year three to four.

We are not sure why. It may be that retirees initially try out many different activities. And novel activities can stretch, sharpen and stimulate the brain.

As these activities become more routine, the novelty will wear off and this may diminish their power to enhance cognitive performance.

**RD: The study highlights the importance of motivation. Can you give me an example?**

**LB:** We measured what we call people's "need for cognition," or the extent to which an individual will seek out mentally stimulating activities and actually enjoy the effort involved. This is a trait that is fairly stable over time.

We found that the need for cognition was a protective factor against cognitive decline from year three to year four. But we didn't find any relationship between need for cognition and cognitive status at year three.

So, it looks like the need for mental stimulation grows in importance over time. In other words, as retirees settle into retirement, they need to ramp up the intensity of their intellectual pursuits.

**RD: Researchers also looked for signs of depression . . .**

**LB:** Most of the research on depression and cognitive decline has focused on adults over 65, and the results have been mixed.

Our team wanted to find out if depression was a risk factor in the period immediately following retirement and for a slightly younger age group.

The findings suggest that even enduring mild symptoms of depression can lead to cognitive decline in older adults.

**RD: Keeping mentally fit demands a combination of stimulating routines and effort. Is that right?**

**LB:** I think it is helpful to think about mental fitness the way you think about physical fitness.

A person who doesn't enjoy the challenge of intense physical activity is less likely to exercise regularly and, when they do, they may not exercise intensely. So, they won't be as physically fit as someone who loves the feeling they get when they push themselves physically — say by signing up for a tough aerobics class or engaging in competitive sports.

**RD: Any tips?**

**LB:** There is growing public awareness of the importance of staying mentally active as we age. But, as with other things, people differ in their level of motivation.

Again, I think people who strive to be physically fit can offer us inspiration. I know that if I work alone at the gym, I'm not the type of person who will push myself as much as I would if I worked out with a friend or was part of

a fitness group. In the group setting, my engagement is linked to the performance of others and reinforced by praise and encouragement.

Maybe retirees, who have lost the structure of work deadlines and miss the support and encouragement of peers, need to find a similar structure in retirement in order to engage in intellectual activities with sufficient intensity.

Signing up for a continuing education class, starting a book club in the neighbourhood or investing in a new hobby can extend our lives in new dimensions and new directions.

The idea is to prevent the brain from developing lazy habits and to strive for maximal brain health.

### **Study: Older Widowers Wary of Tying the Knot**

Remarkably little is known about the attitudes of older widowers to romance and remarriage.

Widowers, it is true, are more likely to remarry than older widowed women but the actual numbers are quite low.

A new study published online in the *Journal of Aging Studies* (July 21, 2013) has found that only three per cent of British men re-partnered and none remarried.

The research was part of a larger study of British widowers by a team at the University of Liverpool in the U.K. The participants were between the ages of 55 and 98, and they had been widowed between three months and 25 years.

#### **Here are five reasons widowers gave for not remarrying:**

##### **1. "No one can compare with Grace."**

Some men were unwilling to remarry because of their deep feelings for their late partner. These men believed no other woman could measure up to their late wife.

As "Matthew" put it, "Well you see there would be nobody could compare with Grace. Nobody could ever do that, take that place because it was a bloody good relationship."

## **2. Comparisons between late wife and new woman**

Others expressed concerns about potential relationships and the tendency to make comparisons between the late wife and the new partner. "Billy," who didn't plan to remarry, said these comparisons damage relationships.

## **3. "You're not getting married for the moon and the stars."**

"Dave" was in a new relationship but he felt guilty.

In fact, he said one reason for participating in the study was the wish to discuss his new relationship.

I went out with her a few times you know, and we have now developed a very nice rapport and a very nice type of relationship. But the question I am asking you is this. I feel very guilty. Now should I or should I not?

"I don't know if I'll get married again," Dave added. "I mean, at my age, you get married, you're not getting married for the moon and the stars, so to speak. But I probably will do."

## **4. Second marriage may not be successful**

Some men wanted to maintain the status quo because they were scared that marriage would spoil their existing good relationships.

"I am not going to screw up a good relationship by getting married. I think I have the best of both worlds," "Gordon" explained. "I can do my own sort of activities; I can be on my own . . . get going out for a drink."

## **5. Many widows don't want to remarry.**

The research also echoed past studies that suggest older widows like the independence that comes from having their own home, along with the

reduced sense of obligation to provide long-term care should their partner's health decline.

"They like to be a friend," said "Daniel". "And they don't want to be tied down."

## ROUNDUP

### **RAGING GRANNIES PUSH FOR ACTION ON CLIMATE**

**CHANGE:** Ottawa's raging grannies belted out a musical plea for action on behalf of the Earth and their grandchildren at a rally in front of Ottawa City Hall on Sunday, Sept. 29, 2013.

Their message: we need to change the way we produce and use energy.

The rally for the Rideau River and climate action was organized by [Ecology Ottawa](#) and the Ottawa chapter of [350.org](#).

The concerned citizens rallied as the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) released its fifth report on the physical science of global warming, identifying human activity as the driving force behind dangerous climate change.

**LEISURE PURSUITS:** Looking for new program ideas for your local library or community centre in 2014?

Why not invite older adults to share their passionate pursuits: quilting, mountain hiking, amateur theater, woodworking, collecting model trains, tour guiding, traditional crafts or whatever.

The idea is to spark new conversations among community members and to provide individuals with opportunities to share pursuits that thrill and invigorate them.

Keep it informal and fun. Instead of presentations, think sharing circles.

**Add intergenerational twist**

Tap into your local school community. Talk to the principal about arranging an opportunity for older adults to share their pursuits with the students.

Intergenerational programs can enrich the school curriculum, build bonds between generations and boost older people's image in the community.

### **NEW GUIDE HELPS DOCTORS DISCUSS END-OF-LIFE CARE:**

The Canadian Medical Association journal has published a guide to make it easier for doctors in hospitals to discuss end-of-life issues with patients and their families.

"A lot of the patients I care for are seriously ill and in fragile health, and my observation has been that as a health care team we don't spend that time to understand what their priorities are," said Dr. John You, one of the authors and associate professor at McMaster's departments of medicine and clinical epidemiology and biostatistics. "I think it's an important gap that we need to close."

The guide is endorsed by the Canadian Researchers at the End of Life Network and offers advice for doctors on when to start talking about long-term planning with patients.

More broadly, the authors urge Canadians to consider [advance care planning](#) and to discuss their wishes with family members.

*Source: with notes from [theglobeandmail.com](http://theglobeandmail.com)*

**TREASURED LETTERS:** So when was the last time you wrote a handwritten letter?

Around the world, letter mail volumes have plummeted with the rise of electronic communication. But a new journal hopes to buck the trend by encouraging people to put pen to paper.

The brainchild of novelist Jon McGregor, [The Letters Page](#) is dedicated to exploring what letter writing means to writers and readers today.

"Letters are one of the earliest forms of writing, and they are quite a big part of literary culture and history," writes McGregor. "They're like a [vinyl] record or a piece of handwriting. They're valued as distinct."

Letters published in the first edition of the journal came from Canada, the United States, France, Spain, Germany, Cyprus and Donegal. The correspondence sparkles, carrying news, expressions of love and a sense of time and place.

*The Letters Page* is published three times a year as a free downloadable PDF.

Interested? Get out your pen and paper and fire off a handwritten letter. The mailing details are [here](#).

*Source: theguardian.com*