

## Creating the Good: Americans Aged 50 and Older as Agents for Change

Bonnie Cramer, MSW

North Carolina is my heart and my home. During my long career with state government, I've lived my passion for health and human services, long-term care, social work, aging, volunteering, and social activism. Those years prepared me for the opportunity and honor I received earlier this year—becoming chair of the Board of Directors of AARP. The well-known, nonpartisan membership association is the nation's leading organization for Americans aged 50 and older and serves 40 million members. AARP envisions a society where everyone ages with dignity and purpose and fulfills their goals and dreams. This year AARP celebrates 50 years of enhancing the quality of life for all people as they age.

Pessimists might dismiss AARP's vision as wishful thinking. But I know a simple but powerful truth: older Americans from every region, background, culture, race, lifestyle, income, education level, and state across the nation want to be heard. They are raising their voices, joining forces, and taking action to create the kind of world AARP foresees. They want to be a more powerful force for social change.

One of my Board colleagues recently said, "You have a voice, use it! You have ideas, act on them!" She was speaking to a group of teens and twenty-somethings at the World Youth Congress in Quebec, but her words apply to all of us, no matter where we are in life. It is especially important for those of us in the second half of life.

Americans have a long history of sharing, giving of themselves to help others, and making a difference in their neighborhoods and communities. We are avid volunteers, generous philanthropists, and eager participants in the myriad organizations and causes that contribute to the public good. The urge to serve and to change the world often springs from a youthful intolerance of injustice and grows through adulthood. People are looking for ways to give back, to show appreciation for those who gave them a helping hand, and to make the world a better place for future generations.

The giving spirit endures, but the hope for a better world is faltering. An AARP survey released this summer showed that 55% of adults aged 44 to 79 say their generation will leave the world in worse condition than when they inherited it, compared to 20% who expect it to be in better condition.<sup>1</sup>

This is a sad commentary on the economic state of the nation. Jobs are hard to find; the price of gas, food, and health care are high; the housing market is stalled; the number of people without health insurance or with inadequate health insurance is climbing; and foreclosures and bankruptcies have reached new highs. But looking more closely at the survey numbers reveals that people who volunteer regularly have a more optimistic

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outlook. They also expect the world to be in poorer shape, but they are less likely than occasional or non-volunteers to expect worse conditions in the future.

Rather than succumbing to helplessness or hopelessness in the face of economic and social challenges, AARP strives to empower members, to demand and work for positive social change, and to help those in need. We know what a potent army this population can be: 73% of older Americans reported volunteering in the past year to help an organization, and an equivalent number—75%—have volunteered on their own.<sup>1</sup> Why do they do it? "Making the community a better place to

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live” is one reason, but they place even greater value on “making a difference by helping others.”<sup>1</sup>

As individuals and groups, older Americans seem to know that they *can* make a difference. I chair the AARP Board today, which is a volunteer position, because 50 years ago, one person got angry and said, “Enough!” Her name was Ethel Percy Andrus, founder of AARP. She was a 73-year-old career educator who discovered a former colleague living in a renovated chicken coop. It was the best that the woman could do on her paltry teacher’s pension which was stretched to the limit to cover housing, food, and expensive medications for a chronic condition. This was, of course, before Medicare and at a time when older people were viewed as a liability by the insurance world and as a market nobody wanted.

Dr. Andrus set out to make a wrong situation right. By the time she finished doggedly canvassing 42 health insurance companies, she found one that could see the vision and wisdom of offering group health insurance to retired teachers. Later the coverage expanded to embrace all retirees, and from these beginnings AARP was born.

Dr. Andrus recognized herself as an empowered person. She valued her own strength, and she also knew that there was strength in numbers. The combination proved explosive. Among older Americans, both numbers and strength are set to detonate again in the very near future.

In the midst of historic global aging, the United States is on the verge of experiencing the largest increase in the 50+ aged population ever. Most of the 78 million-strong baby boomers have already surged into their 50s and early 60s. In 2011, the first boomers turn 65. Along with their predecessors, war heroes from WWII, they are the voice of life experience, of a desire to change the world, and an unwillingness to settle for less than the best. Leading-edge boomers are among those most likely to say they will be increasing the amount of volunteering they do in the next 5 years. Forty-six percent of older boomers say they are at least somewhat likely to increase the amount of time they spend volunteering during the next 5 years, including 29% who are very likely to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Expect them to shake things up. I am convinced that civic and social engagement, regardless of the issues, are central to positive social change. Volunteerism is the key. I’ve watched it happen again and again. As director of the North Carolina Division of Aging, I helped organize the Senior Tar Heel Legislature. The Legislature is made up of older volunteer representatives, one from each of North Carolina’s 100 counties, working hands-on with staff from the Division of Aging and Adult Services. They have been instrumental in achieving state support for home and community care services, such as home-delivered meals, adult day services, and expanded senior centers. They have also been instrumental in the passage of legislation beneficial to older North Carolinians. Recent examples include requiring criminal background checks to be made before hiring direct care workers in health and long-term care facilities, an increase in the Homestead Property Tax exemption, and the enactment of a tax credit for purchase of long-term care insurance.

North Carolina’s State Aging Services Plan, which reports on the status of seniors and makes recommendations to the General Assembly, is the collaborative work of older adults and advocates, regional and community planners, and public and private service providers. Older North Carolinians are making significant contributions to the vitality and livability of the state. Likewise, volunteers have been the foundation of AARP for 50 years, living out our mission of enhancing the quality of life for people as they age. Today, more than 9 million people are giving back through AARP, through traditional volunteer programs and other creative opportunities.

Thanks to the voluntary contributions of those older Americans, the world is already a better place. They have:

- Helped people file taxes at no charge through AARP Tax-Aide.
- Helped older people maintain financial independence through AARP’s Money Management Program.
- Mentored students and teachers through programs developed by the National Retired Teachers Association, AARP’s retired educator community.
- Conducted community safety audits.
- Educated seniors about identity theft and fraud.
- Linked mature employees to meaningful jobs and training.
- Worked to strengthen health and financial security for all Americans through the Divided We Fail initiative, the largest effort in AARP’s history.

The most critical factors affecting the ability of older Americans to achieve independence, choice, and control in their lives are health, financial security, supportive services, and livable communities. The examples cited above, both from North Carolina and the nation, not only address each of these factors, but also provide avenues for civic engagement.

Divided We Fail is perhaps AARP’s strongest example of civic engagement that empowers older Americans to leave the world better than they found it. This initiative is a broad-based and growing coalition based on 2 fundamental beliefs: that all Americans should have access to affordable, quality health care, and that all Americans should have peace of mind about long-term financial security.

In addition to the founding alliance, a collaboration of strange bedfellows that includes AARP; Business Roundtable, an association of CEOs from America’s largest companies; Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the fastest growing union in North America; and the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), the nation’s leading small business advocacy association, the Divided We Fail coalition has attracted nearly 90 other diverse organizations and associations representing aging, women, faith, ethnicity, lifestyle, health care, the entertainment industry, and other business interests. This broad representation underscores the impact that health care and financial security challenges are having on all families, communities, and generations.

Divided We Fail strikes a chord partly because it offers various levels of engagement. People become more educated

about the urgency of health and financial security concerns; they join rallies during the presidential primaries; they collect pledge signatures from groups and individuals; they send letters to Congress or become e-activists who communicate with elected officials on important issues on a moment's notice; and they contribute personal stories about their health or financial struggles.

Divided We Fail illustrates what can happen when we look beyond traditional approaches to volunteerism to engage more older Americans in service. This will be critical if we expect to expand communities for healthy aging in a meaningful way.

Building livable communities to accommodate an aging population is a moral imperative for a society committed to empowering its people. Ninety percent of Americans aged 50 or older want to remain in their current homes and communities as they age.<sup>2</sup> To do so, however, means that communities must support their evolving needs and be "livable." People of all ages and abilities should have safe, affordable, strategically designed housing options; transportation choices; and opportunities for social and civic engagement.

Currently older volunteers are involved in building livable communities as spokespersons and agents of change, as service providers to drive innovation in the marketplace, and as citizen

participants on planning boards, bringing the voice of the 50+ consumer to influence local decision making.

AARP's research indicates that the primary reason people don't volunteer is that no one has asked them. Nearly 7 in 10 non-volunteers have never been asked.<sup>1</sup> AARP is strengthening our capacity to ask. Currently we are targeting 2 new approaches to expand engagement opportunities. First, we are a major sponsor of a new coalition called ServiceNation, which works with more than 100 other groups to solve problems through civic engagement and citizen service. We are also initiating a new online community destination called [AARP.org/CreatetheGood](http://AARP.org/CreatetheGood) to encourage individuals to get involved on their own schedules and according to their own interests. The name "Create the Good" comes from a quote from AARP's founder, Dr. Andrus: "The challenge, to live up to our better selves, to believe well of our fellow men and perhaps by doing so, to help create the good."

Throughout the nation and the world, people aged 50 and older are giving their time, skills, sweat, and creative ability to create a greater good for all. It's never too late to answer the call for service, but the best time to answer is now. **NCMJ**

## REFERENCES

1 Bridgeland JM, Putnam RD, Wofford HL; Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. *More to Give: Tapping the Talents of the Baby Boomer, Silent and Greatest Generations*. Washington, DC: AARP; 2008.

2 Bayer AH, Harper LH; Greenwald and Associates. *Fixing to Stay: A National Survey of Housing and Home Modification Issues*. Washington, DC: AARP; 2000.

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