

When educators express concerns about meeting learning standards, promoting remediation, or preparing young people for the workforce, a question must be asked. *Are you reaching out to older adults to help your students and faculty?* If the answer is no, the educators are not serious about solving their problems.

My Two Worlds: Aging and Education

*The challenge is avoiding collision and finding harmony.
It is apparent that generations do best when working together.*

by Michael O'Donnell, Director
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Aging

During working hours, I serve as director of an Area Agency on Aging. In my private life, I serve on the Education Commission of Central Catholic High School. Our local commission of education is working to develop and implement a program of early detection and prevention of drug abuse among teens enrolled in high schools across the Diocese of Peoria. At the Area Agency on Aging, we are currently expanding our current training curriculum to include assessment of older adults with alcoholism, prescription drug interactions, depression, and other forms of mental illness. Such is the circle of life.

Background

Assuming responsibility I learned from being the eldest of six children.

Delegating responsibility I'm learning as the father of four daughters. My mother taught me the skill of listening and making peace with people. My father was dedicated to supporting his family. He also had the patience and

the bravery to teach us how to drive, something I'm doing now with my daughters. My dad was a chef. I worked with him from the time I was ten until I was 18. He taught me how to cook, and he taught me how to be a fair boss.

My parents believed in the importance of a Catholic education. I received a faith-filled education from kindergarten through the university and have come to value this more than anything. I also learned how to think logically and how to write. These skills have served me well in my career.

Personally, I get excited about learning new things. People tell me I must be an information junky. My day is not complete until I have read the daily newspaper. I suppose if I have an addiction it is to National Public



Mike O'Donnell

Radio. I love the program "All Things Considered." Since I drive so much, NPR provides a window on the world. I also love reading, not just about aging, but about other cultures, history, art, and music. I sing in our church choir and enjoy listening to classical music, especially Andrea Bocelli, the Italian tenor. Since I have four daughters ranging in age

from 14 to 21, I have also come to appreciate modern rock music. My favorites include Dave Matthews Band and Barenaked Ladies. Shocking!

Learning from My Elders

I can think of several heroes: My first was Father Duran, a Palatine priest, born in Chile and educated in Germany. He introduced me to classical music by loaning me the complete recordings of Beethoven's works and taking me to my first concert at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia.

I think of Marian Ascoli, former Director of Family Service in Champaign, and Lynn Plath, former

Director of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program in Champaign. They hired me to be a driver and community worker for RSVP volunteers in 1977. From them I learned the meaning of empowerment. I learned the discipline of social work: how to help others help themselves. From the 300+ senior volunteers, I learned what it means to be part of a community and what it means to love life.

I think of Al Guttenberg and Leonard Heumann, Professors at the Department of Urban Planning at the University of Illinois. From Al Guttenberg who was as much philosopher as planner, I learned the power of symbols in society. From Len Heumann, I learned tolerance, self-respect, and how to defend my convictions.

Elders Learning from Students

During my senior year at St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia, I was hired as a personal care attendant to Bill Mansell. Bill was a 53 year old paraplegic with severe rheumatoid arthritis. He lived with his parents who were near 80. I was hired to help take care of his personal care and drive him. He could travel on a hospital cot in the rear of an enclosed Chevy truck. After graduating, Bill hired me to drive him across country to visit friends all across the United

States. It was a great experience for both of us. I saw Florida, Texas, and California for the first time. Bill was able to visit friends he had gone to school with and corre-



My Two Worlds; O'Donnell above with his colleagues from aging, and on the left, the world of education

sponded with for years. In later years, Bill attended my wedding. Bill and I became trusted friends. I'll never forget his personal courage and his zest for living. I made him laugh.

At the Area Agency on Aging we have been blessed with excellent student interns from colleges and universities in our area. We gain so much from them, fresh incites, enthusiasm, hard work and energy. Many of our interns

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have gone on to successful careers in the aging network. I hope they feel that their experience with us has helped them form a sound foundation for the future.

Young people are important resources for older adults to age successfully. I see many examples of this. Young people bring hope and joy to the lives of the old. Young people want to be loved and accepted. Older people want the same things and perhaps have more time to devote to nurturing the young. Older folks have knowledge and

practical experience to share with the young. By older people demonstrating acceptance, the young respond by being open to learning. I believe we are entering a new era when these reciprocal relationships will be celebrated and encouraged. I see these relationships played out in an extraordinary way in the lives of grandparents raising their grandchildren.

My Two Worlds Colliding

As a member of the Illinois Association of Area Agencies on Aging, my Agency is advocating for the use of at least 25% of the Tobacco Settlement funds for programs and services for older persons. Every year 460,000

people die in the U.S. from smoking related diseases - 70% of these deaths are among persons 65 years of age and older, and 94% of these deaths are among persons 50 and older.

GI Joe didn't know the long term harmful effect of tobacco when he was given free cigarettes during WWII. Today, the scientific evidence about nicotine addiction is clear. We know today that one in three smokers will die from smoking-related diseases. Seniors are the victims of smoking and need help accessing health care and community-based long term care services. Many want to stop smoking and they should get the help they need to quit. Many want to stop smoking to breathe better and improve the quality of their lives and the lives of their loved ones, their spouse and their grandchildren.

We also know that every day, 3,000 kids start smoking. If they become addicted and continue smoking into adulthood, one-third of them will die of smoking related diseases. Tobacco kills seniors, middle agers and kids. The last thing we want is to pit kids against older adults in the debate about how to spend the Tobacco Settlement funds. When it comes to addictions to tobacco, alcohol, and drugs, we have one thing in common: the preservation of human life. Life is precious - at any age.

In my work in aging, I serve with Sheila Edwards as Co-Chair of the Illinois Department on Aging's Task Force on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. Grandparents and other kinship caregivers are raising grandchildren for various reasons: death, disease, divorce, drugs, incarceration - the list goes on. Drug addiction affecting one or both parents is like introducing a wild animal into the family: it is out of control. Grandparents and kinship caregivers are silent saviors who step forward or are expected to help the children when their family breaks down. These grandparents bear terrific burdens - emotional, financial, legal, etc. Many want to avoid involvement with government programs, such as DCFS and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and therefore they bear these burdens privately at great expense to themselves. As caring communities, we must be there for them. I see my role as educator, advocate, and facilitator to link grandparents and other kinship caregivers to information, support groups to help them get the help they need.

Three Greatest Challenges for Aging

1. Overcoming stereotypes about aging and creating a culture in which every human being has the opportunity to realize his or her full potential.

In short, older persons must be recognized as people of worth. We need a new way of articulating human development. I believe the Japanese conducted a national referendum several years ago to invent a new word that would capture the meaning of growing older. I don't recall the Japanese word, but I the English translation is "the age of fruition."

2. Overcoming the "we" versus "they" syndrome of intergenerational politics

Just listen to the rhetoric surrounding the long term viability of the Social Security program. We have met the aging and they are us. We need to take personal responsibility for our own financial security—yes. But, we cannot abandon our long-term commitment to a national contract which ensures economic security for individuals and families who have become economically vulnerable due to the death of a spouse, parent, or lost their job due to disability.

3. We must take responsibility for our children. We must be good role models for them. We must help them avoid destructive behaviors by setting a good example as adults. We must help them to overcome destructive behaviors and make healthier choices in life. We must help our children age successfully.