STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

On the Frontlines

Take Advantage of Us!

Retiring baby boomers are dying to retool their professional skills to help society. How can society help them do so?

By Marc Freedman

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2004

Copyright © 2004 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

DO NOT COPY

STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

Take Advantage of Us!

Retiring baby boomers are dying to retool their professional skills to help society. How can society help them do so?

Not long after retiring from his medical practice, 60-year-old Bill Schwartz encountered one of his former patients in downtown San Mateo, Calif. Half recognizing Schwartz as she brushed by him on the busy street, the woman whirled around and exclaimed: "Didn't you used to be Dr. Schwartz?!"

Schwartz was delighted to inform her that although he was no longer seeing private patients, he remained every bit the good doctor. With a band of other "retired" physicians, nurses, dentists, and healthcare workers, Schwartz was in the midst of dedicating his newfound freedom to creating the Samaritan House Free Medical Clinic, an offshoot of a large nonprofit human services agency near San Francisco. Last year Samaritan House saw more than 5,000 patients without access to quality care, using only a few paid staffers and 50 volunteers.

Projects like Samaritan House challenge the notion that the graying of American society is all about entitlement costs and new burdens on the nonprofit sector. As Bill Schwartz and his compatriots demonstrate, this transformation is every bit an opportunity to be seized as a problem to be solved. Indeed, it constitutes, among other uplifting possibilities, a potentially vast source of talent for nonprofits.

America is in the midst of a demographic revolution. Half the people who have ever lived to the age of 60 in this country are currently alive, and this group is about to double in size as nearly 80 million members of the baby boom generation cross over into their 60s, 70s, and beyond. By 2030, nearly a quarter of the population will be over 60. It's a phenomenon demographers call the "Floridization" of America.

In the last century, the average American lifespan has gained 30 years – from 47 in 1900 to 77 today – and this trend is expected to continue. A female child born in the coming decades can anticipate a 50 percent chance of living to 100. F. Scott Fitzgerald's adage that there are no second acts in American lives is rapidly becoming obsolete.

We also have a habit of creating new life stages in this country. Prior to the 19th century, there was no conception of childhood; young people were dressed as "little adults" and treated accordingly. Today, we are in the midst of inventing a new phase of life between the middle years and true old age.

Once this time of life was a brief hiatus dominated by the idea of retirement for those who were, in Walter Reuther's phrase, "Too old to work, too young to die." The golden years were a time to get some much-needed R and R for a few years before the onset of rapid decline. However, retirement was never designed to last for decades, and it has been stretched to the breaking point.

Today, women and men reaching their 60s confront a new challenge. Many are winding up the tasks of their middle years as careers run their course and children move out of the house. Yet they can look forward to a relatively healthy, vigorous old age that may approximate midlife in duration.

"The Third Age"

While the old retirement ideal will continue to hold sway for some, many others are looking only for a temporary pause – to catch their breath after long years of midlife work – before tackling the next challenge. They are at the doorstep of what the British call "the third age." For the vast majority, the next challenge will involve not only a new phase of life, but also a new chapter in their working lives.

According to recent research by AARP, nearly 70 percent of the boomers plan to work in their so-called retirement years. A closer look at the numbers reveals that moving into new roles in public service is a high priority for a sizable segment of this population: 54 percent in the

MARC FREEDMAN *is president of Civic Ventures, co-founder of Experience Corps, and author of "Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America." He can be reached at mfreedman@civicventures.org.*

AARP study state that doing work that helps other people is very important to them. (Six percent say they want to become teachers, for instance.)

This inclination toward good work is good news. Not only is the growing population of older Americans the longest-lived this country has ever known, it is also the best educated. There has been an unprecedented societal investment in developing the skills – professional, managerial, and otherwise – of this population. The number of people who have attended college has quadrupled, and we've witnessed a proliferation of professional degrees compared to previous generations.

For a nonprofit sector long on idealism and energy but often without good access to expertise, tapping into a highly skilled population looking for engagement and opportunities to continue to use their accumulated experience is a potential human resource windfall.

As the first of the boomers prepare to hit 60 in January 2006 – with a lawyer named Bill Clinton in the first cohort – the timing couldn't be better. Indeed, this first wave is none other than the group that John F. Kennedy exhorted to ask what they could do for their country in their younger years. We invented the Peace Corps to tap their earlier idealism. But for all its abstract appeal, there are significant challenges as we think about connecting the rich resources of older people with the needs of nonprofits.

One is helping individuals navigate their way from midlife careers to new chapters in the nonprofit world. For the most part, planning for growing older is financial. Little thought is given to how we might actually spend the 20 or 30 years beyond midlife. And there are few places to turn for help. Many are left to their own devices, spinning their wheels in search of direction and connection.

Higher education could play a much more significant role in helping individuals find their way to second acts in service. Consider an example from the 40th reunion of the class of 1962 at the Wharton School (where I participated in a symposium on "The Next Chapter"). Many of those attending expressed a deep desire to make service a more prominent focus in their older years – and great confusion about how to act on this impulse.

Social entrepreneurship is hardly the province of young people.

One class member, who also graduated from the University of Pennsylvania's law school, expressed the desire to shift from private-sector litigation to part-time general counsel work with a local dance school. But he had no idea how to make the transition. Could the Penn law school offer a one- or two-week summer institute for people like himself, he wondered? It is not hard to imagine management schools, especially those with a public service or nonprofit bent, also creating opportunities along these lines. (It might even be lucrative: the monthlong Odyssey program at Harvard Business School – subtitled "School for the Second Half of Life" – targets this age group, charges $15,000, and is overwhelmed with applicants.)

"Candy Striper, My Ass!"

Nonprofits will need to do a better job making use of the talent in this population, understanding that it will take more than the chance to stuff envelopes to capture the imagination of the coming wave of boomers. *Fortune* characterized the problem a couple of years ago in an article – pungently titled "Candy Striper, My Ass!" – that chronicled the frustration of highly skilled managers trying to apply their talents in the nonprofit world. A forthcoming study by the National Council on the Aging confirms the persistence of this problem: Most nonprofit leaders surveyed had few plans for tapping into this group – despite the presence of profound human resource needs.

One source of hope is a new generation of older entrepreneurs like Dr. Bill Schwartz, people who are not content to wait around for the nonprofit sector to wake up to the opportunity under its nose. Unwilling to let their professional skills wither away, they are taking matters into their own hands, fashioning new organizations like Samaritan House.

They are a vivid reminder that the history of aging in America is one of institutional invention. Fifty years ago, we didn't even have retirement communities or senior centers. More to the point, change makers like Schwartz illustrate that social entrepreneurship is hardly the exclusive province of younger people.

Harnessing the skills and good intentions of aging Americans constitutes one of the most compelling opportunities for philanthropy and public policy today. It is the chance to create a society that balances both the responsibilities and the joys of engagement across the generations, and that refuses to squander the most experienced quarter of the population. □