

from the field of gerontological social work practice

THE MEDIA VIEW OF OLDER ADULTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

This month SBW Notes focuses on societal attitudes about aging as portrayed in two recent documentaries. Societal attitudes about aging have a direct impact on gerontological social work practice - affecting how older adults and their families feel about themselves as well as the choices they make. We share our responses and look forward to your comments.

YOUNG @HEART

Young @Heart is a documentary currently showing in local theaters that follows a 26 member chorus of older adults (average age 80) - and the dedicated director who founded the group in a senior center 25 years ago - during the seven weeks they rehearse new songs for an overseas tour. The choice of classic rock songs is superb. Who can resist the joy of James Brown's "I Feel Good"? Who would not be moved by watching the group sing "Forever Young" to young male inmates in a prison? Audiences at their staged performance sing along and sway in their seats - as do viewers watching at the Cineplex.

Apparently this was not enough for the young filmmaker. The patronizing tone of his voice-over is matched by the insertion of four surreal music videos that highlight the infirmities of age. ("Stayin' Alive" is sung by an old man connected to his own operating oxygen tank. The Ramone's "I Wanna Be Sedated" is performed in wheelchairs.) Images of chorus members are juxtaposed with a tattoo parlor and a carousel. Much is made of the group's difficulty learning new lyrics and mastering 71 rapid-fire repetitions of the line "Yes We Can Can."

The individual personalities of the chorus members shine through every frame. They respond to foolish questions with sensible answers. Dignified, wise, and witty, their spirits are as strong and clear as their voices. All are obviously having a wonderful time performing and being filmed.

Reviewers call this documentary "inspiring". But what are we - as gerontologists - to make of it? Is it a celebration of old age? A reflection of the ageist attitudes of our time? Ageless individuals singing ageless music? All of the above? See and judge for yourself.

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS

This compelling documentary, aired on PBS earlier this month, follows five New England families committed to caring for and providing emotional support to the elderly and disabled parents with whom they have deep and loving bonds.

A variety of scenarios are shown. An elderly mother able to remain in her own home, in spite of her infirmities, visited daily by a loving daughter, and round the clock home health aides (costing \$250,000 year). Another equally infirm but less affluent elder provided hands on care by an equally devoted daughter with the help of a government sponsored home health aide 4 hours daily. An elderly couple, both ill, the husband with early stages of dementia, and cared for by his wife and 4 adults daughters supportive of their parents and of each other. The dutiful and loving son whose wife has carried the burden of caregiving resulting in a strained marital relationship. Several situations where the unflagging devotion of adult children carries over into the nursing home.

It would seem that not a stone is left unturned in this documentation of the challenges facing families. These include the burdens and stress they experience, end of life decision making, the rewards and satisfactions of caregiving, and rekindled intergenerational relationships. However, one is left wondering. What about those adult children with ambivalent feelings about their parents, those in conflict with each other and their parents, those who live far away, and those with more compelling family priorities? Is an attitude conveyed in this documentary that marginalizes the many families whose situations defy straight-forward solutions? We look forward to a sequel.

To view *Caring for Your Parents* or learn more information, please visit <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/caringforyourparents/>.

We look forward to your comments and experiences.

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm's founding partners, and a group of associates. For more information, please visit www.sbwpartners.com or call 212.337.2555.

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SBW ASSOCIATES

We are pleased to share with you two more associates of SBW Partners, Suzannah Chandler and Harriet Rzeletny.



Suzannah Chandler, LMSW was Co-founder and, from 1972 through June 2006, Executive Director of Search and Care, a privately funded not-for-profit community based agency that provides care management and preventive protective services to socially isolated chronically ill and mentally impaired older people-most of them homebound, and living on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Prior to establishing Search and Care, she provided program support for the National Council on the Aging, including coordination of the first Regional White House Conference on Aging (Kansas City, August 1970). She was also Co-founder and past President of the East Side Council on the Aging and member of the Advisory Board of the New York State Office of Children & Family Services. A member of the Hunter College Hall of Fame, Suzannah Chandler also was a recipient of the Samuel Sadin Law Institute Distinguished Service Award.



HARRIET RZETELNY, LCSW received her MSW from Adelphi University in 1976. Since then, she has worked, taught and written extensively in the field of aging. She was associated with Brookdale Center on Aging for over twenty years where she developed and taught courses in a wide range of aging-related subjects including Work with the Frail Elderly in Residential Care Facilities and Senior Centers, Reminiscing and Life Review and People in Mid-Life Transitions. She was an Associate Professor at the NYU School of Social Work where she taught courses in aging and advanced clinical practice, and has written numerous training manuals and curricula for a variety of aging programs including *A Multidisciplinary Training Curriculum for Family Caregivers of Dementia Patients Living at Home* for Memory Care Home Solutions in St. Louis, MO and *Home Again: Here to Stay - a Model for Culture Change* for Isabella Geriatric Center in New York. Aging also figures in her fiction writing: her series of detective stories, published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, features a home care social worker. In addition, she maintains a private psychotherapy practice.

SBW AFFILIATES

We are pleased to share with you an affiliate of SBW Partners, E jj Olson & Associates.



E jj Olson & Associates, an affiliate of SBW Partners, are nationally recognized as consultants for health and human service continuum of care systems with a special emphasis on developing programs in gerontology and geriatrics. Established in 1988, E jj Olson & Associates is committed to working with government and private sector agencies in developing new and innovative programs and strategic solutions. The firm assists health systems in developing coordinated continuums of care, works with human service agencies and Area Agencies on Aging, evaluates the effectiveness of programs, counsels governments, designs integrated human service departments, and evaluates strategic options for government and non-profit agencies.

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