

Creativity in Service

Background Reading

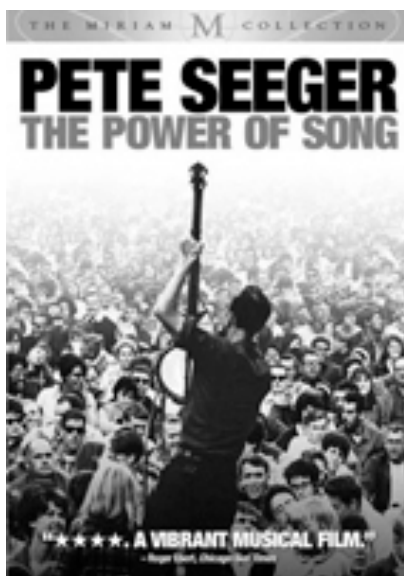
Elders in Service to Community

When we're young we just take all the time and I figure now it's time to give a little bit.

- Woody Brown on his work at at Hale Makua Health Center in *Of Wind and Waves*

In many international films old people participate in community, foster community—and even in some respects create community. Elders in these films complete their life's work in the context of community, and thus they either transform others or are themselves transformed through that process.

- Robert Yahnke
Heroes of Their Own Stories



What messages does this DVD cover communicate about film and song as media to promote service to community?

In the 21st century familiar stereotypes of older people kicking back in retirement and leisure have been replaced with more realistic perceptions that place elders at the center of community involvement. Whether labeled civic engagement, volunteerism or community service, the reality is that people in their sixties and beyond continue to give back to their communities in large numbers.

Many recent studies confirm this trend. In 2003 the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) issued a “Working in Retirement” report showing that 57% of working people between 50 and 70 expected to participate in volunteer or charity work upon their retirement from the workforce (Brown, 2003). A 2008 study of nearly 700 retirees published in *The Gerontologist* indicated that 18% worked for more than five hours per week as volunteers in their communities. These numbers are large enough for researchers to justify the inclusion of “civic engagement” as a distinct role for life in retirement (Kaskie et al., 2008).

Gene Cohen is among the foremost researchers in the area of creativity and aging. In his book *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* he suggested that:

The impulse to give back becomes especially acute in later life as people’s perspectives about their own mortality shift and their values change as a result of confronting the challenges of aging...participants in my study who found meaningful volunteer experiences and other ways to “give back” were those most satisfied with their retirement. (Cohen, 2005, p. 151)

Extending Opportunities for Elder Service

Cohen's findings were echoed in the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He interviewed people in their seventies who had been highly creative in their youth. He found that "often their interest had broadened to include larger issues; politics, human welfare, the environment, and occasionally transcendental concerns with the future of the universe" (cited in Vaillant, 2002, p. 240).

One consequence of these studies has been an increased awareness of the need to extend opportunities for older citizens to participate in civic life. The 2005 White House Conference on Aging concluded with resolutions calling for the reauthorization of the National and Community Service Act to expand meaningful volunteer opportunities for the nation's aging population (Rozario, 2007). In 2006 the Older Americans Act was reauthorized providing new authority to the Administration on Aging to initiate programs that support the civic engagement of older citizens.

Civic organizations have mirrored this policy direction. In the first decade of the new century the Gerontological Society of America, the National Council on Aging, and the

American Society on Aging all named civic engagement as a program priority for their agencies.

Elders seeking to help others through service to community include world famous models of selfless contribution such as Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama and Mohandas Gandhi who famously said "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Less well known is his reflection on the spirit of giving: "Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy" (Gandhi, Haribhai & Bok, 1993, p. 175).

Gandhi's devotion to community service inspired the group South Asian Americans Leading Together to establish a National Gandhi Day of Service. In 2008 this program sponsored "Be the Change" events in over 60 cities and campuses across the United States (Punnoose, 2008).

Most civic engagement by elders happens in quiet and constant ways every day across the country and around the world. An example of this humble daily practice is the volunteer service offered by Woody Brown, inventor of the modern ocean catamaran. In his nineties Woody decided to offer his volunteer time near his home on Maui to the adult day care center, Hale Makua, which means Home of Respected Elders.

The guiding principles of Hale Makua define it as a village demonstrating compassion, involvement and diversity as antidotes to loneliness, helplessness and boredom. "Serving Community" is one of Hale Makua's core values (Hale Makua, 2009). For several years before his own passing at Hale Makua Woody would bicycle there several times a week for six-hour volunteer work sessions during which he would visit with and care for others. It is this type of creative and generous spirit that keeps elders alive and engaged for as long as they are able in the effort to offer back to their communities.



What message does this poster give about aging and service?

