

Our Guest Editors Talk about civic engagement



Washington University

NANCY MORROW-HOWELL

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For philanthropists and scholars, policy makers, advocates, popular authors, and nonprofit entrepreneurs, civic engagement has become the mantra of the day in aging. With so much attention, and some confusion, surrounding the phenomenon, the *Generations* editorial board decided to step back and ask, What does civic engagement mean? Why does it matter now? And what are the implications of a civically engaged older population—for older people themselves, for those who work with them and their families, and for the larger community?

In this issue, our guest editors, two of the most respected voices on the topic, provide that sharpened focus. Nancy Morrow-Howell, the distinguished Pumphrey Professor of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, holds a doctorate in social welfare and is known for her research and teaching in community services and positive aging and civic engagement for older people. Marc Freedman holds an MBA and is founder and CEO of the nonprofit think tank Civic Ventures in San Francisco. He is responsible for such efforts as the creation of Experience Corps, the national nonprofit service program for people age 50 and older, and The Purpose Prize, the first award to recognize “social innovators over 60.” Morrow-Howell and Freedman have taken separate paths to arrive at a shared commitment to civic engagement for older people.

When Nancy Morrow-Howell began working in aging, she says, she knew she had found a home. As a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley, she became part of a research project on services for frail elders. “I

loved going into their homes and talking to them, conducting assessments, and helping them obtain the services that they so badly needed,” she says. Much of Morrow-Howell’s teaching and research, past and present, centers on improving the lives of frail elders, and she has written prolifically and published widely in this realm.

But her work also has evolved in an unexpected way. About ten years ago, amid “early rumblings of positive gerontology,” Morrow-Howell joined a colleague on a project on productive aging. “I had worked so much with people who were severely disadvantaged,” she says, “I wanted to get a balance—to focus as well on the rest of the population, the 80 percent of older people, and the younger old, who are fit and functioning well. I think the message that our students were getting was cockeyed too: that the only reality of aging was depression, dementia, disability.

“I am now really committed to research about productive engagement for all older people. A more balanced focus helps me to teach about the complexity of later life and the capacity that everyone has.”

In addition to serving as principal investigator on an NIA-funded study of depression treatment in long-term care, Morrow-Howell is currently head of an evaluation of Experience Corps, and in another project she is studying the effects of service

programs on older volunteers, particularly those who are less advantaged.

“This type of research addresses the valid criticism of civic engagement that not many opportunities exist for much of the older population,” she says. “We have to be inclusive, to find what is effective in ensuring opportunities for a more positive later life for everyone.”

Marc Freedman’s professional career first focused on kids growing up in poverty and how society could do a better job in their behalf, particularly with education. But that pursuit quickly led to a deep interest in the role older adults might play in this essential undertaking. “The more I focused on the kids, the more I became convinced that the most important ingredient in their potential success was adults who could serve as a significant source of emotional and social support,” he says. His first of a number of critically acclaimed books, *The Kindness of Strangers*, about the mentoring movement, led to a national study of Big Brothers Big Sisters, which demonstrated the impact that mentoring could have. “It was a strong affirmation of the power of the relationships between adult mentors and those kids,” he says. “But there was an extraordinary shortage of mentors.” He found similar situations as he travelled the country working with youth programs for Public/Private Ventures (the pathbreaking organization for which he served as vice president).

“All this meant I first experienced older people as givers rather than recipients,” he says. “I came to this population as an essential human resource for solving social problems, for doing those things only human beings can do. And it came in the context of a gap—not enough people in the middle years to do the remarkable things older Americans were capable of doing. And the bonus is that studies show participation makes a positive difference for older peo-



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ple themselves.” Freedman’s second book was *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America*.

“We are now in the midst of a great transformation, with demographics, longer life, changing economics, and unmet needs in the community all converging,” he says. “As a result, the notion of civic engagement will also need to change. The most promising outlet for engagement by older people in the future will likely be through the avenue of work, encore careers in areas like education, healthcare, nonprofits, and government, where jobs are opening up and experience will be needed.” Freedman’s latest book, due out in May, is *Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life*. The challenge, he says, is twofold: “How can we help prepare people to make that transition? And how can we help organizations make full use of this coming windfall?” ❧

—Mary Johnson