



The LEADERSHIP LOG

More than 45 years of informed opinion about issues facing elders today.

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From the Desk of James F. Seagle, Jr. President, Rogerson Communities

Ageism is Timeless



What happens to people when they are surrounded by negative messages about their value, their competence, their physical attractiveness? Depression, asocial behavior, and neglect of physical and mental health are some results that spring to mind. Over the past 50 years, as the fields of geriatrics and gerontology have evolved, the deleterious effects of ageist messages

have been shown through a multitude of studies. Unfortunately, in my experience, the scapegoating of elders in this youth-oriented society has become worse. And, I hate to say it, even though I have studied the issue and meditated on not falling prey, sometimes I have expressed ageist thoughts in real action.

Early in my career, at the old home, the men in the gardening program resorted to a rake fight to solve a ‘turf’ dispute. After separating them into different areas, the guy with the worst spot, all sun and hard scabble dirt, began bugging me about pruning the rhododendrons in the front lawn. I said I would have the landscape guy take care of it and then summarily forgot. After a month, he took it on himself to prune the plant. When I showed it to the landscaper, thinking it hacked to pieces, he said not so; in fact, he told me the result was almost perfect cuts. It took me until Spring the next year, with the rhododendron luxuriously in bloom, to admit to the elder pruning specialist how wrong I had been.

Come forward a decade. I was late as usual to catch a train at the Rte.128 train station. The station has a set of elevated steps and a bridge over the tracks. As I mounted the steps, there was an elder man struggling with two large suitcases. One step at a time,

his slow steady progress irritated me; but I very kindly offered this, “May I help you with those bags?” He very gruffly and brusquely said, “no thanks, I’m fine.” Then turning to the older woman next to him he said, “Did you hear that guy wants to carry your bags?” Again, my ageism emerged to send that negative message and potentially interfere with a very lovely interaction.

Before building the new Rogerson House, I looked at models of dementia care around the country. At Copper Ridge, Columbia Maryland, I was touring a stunning, brightly lit residential facility with a group from LeadingAge. A middle-aged woman extremely well-coiffed in business attire approached and asked me to speak with her. I assumed she was an executive and felt singled out for special treatment and insight. When we separated from the group, the woman said in a whisper, “You’ve got to get me out of here, they are keeping me against my will.” Whoops! Now I have erred on the other side in assuming that you must have wrinkles to be an Alzheimer’s resident.

Just recently a tenant in one of our buildings asked that I check a leak in her apartment. When entering the kitchen, I said, “Where is it?” She said, “Up in the microwave.” I felt inside the unit and reported it dry. She said, “Jamie it isn’t raining is it?” I assumed that this woman at 101 years of age was losing it similar to the Beacon House resident who claimed that someone was putting dust on her ice cubes. Really quite worried, I found a maintenance guy downstairs to report the incident. “Yeah,” he said, “We can’t figure out how that leak is getting into the microwave.” I really should know better by now.

The prejudice accompanying ageism probably does more damage than any other bigoted behavior in our society. It tips people into depression, and, earlier than necessary, chronic disease. The messages of incompetence can severely hamper self-reliance and the confidence to engage in normal behavior. But, as I have confessed, even with training and experience, the best of us can express ageism in all its virulent forms. Now that I am part of the cohort called elders, I will be trying even harder to avoid the ageist trap.

Jamie