

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SENIORS

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Maximize your Influence

Can we pause for a moment to reclaim the importance of things and people that are old? I know it can only be a brief interruption in our frenetic cultural obsession with the latest, the newest, the youngest, the prettiest. But here, at least, is one small voice for things and folks that are weathered, repaired, preserved, and wise.

Last month my DVD player stopped working right in the middle of a movie I was watching. I called my son to find out what to do. My son has the technology genius gene, like so many in his generation who never have to read the instructions, never think twice about how to program the remote, set the coffee maker, make the printer come online. He was apparently born with the innate ability to download a game of Monopoly, the traffic in downtown Paris, and ten thousand songs to his phone. “Throw it out”, he said to me about my ailing DVD player, “you need a better one anyway.” This really bothered me. Maybe it could be easily fixed....maybe it just needed a good cleaning? Am I going to trash this piece of equipment on my way out the door to buy a new one? Can't I take it someplace to have it repaired? At least, shouldn't I take it apart and salvage the electrical cord and the screws? He laughed at me. In response, I anointed myself as a Crusader to have the thing fixed. It only took a few phone calls, however, to realize that the days are over when you can easily find a gadget repairman. Even by mail it was going to cost me four or five times more than I had originally paid to have someone on the other side of the world take a look. In defeat, I took my son's advice and picked up a shiny new DVD. I'm still waiting for him to hook it up!

This little story is a good metaphor to represent something about our culture that can be discouraging to seniors. Don't get me wrong: this is not a vote against the advances of technology. I believe that most seniors, even those who love to talk about the “good old days”, do not want to stand in the way of creativity and progress. But it does seem sometimes that as we throw away our plastic silverware, paper napkins, disposable cameras, and broken DVD players, we may also be throwing away some important values. And as we trade our home-cooked meals, freshly baked cookies, and time spent working on a puzzle for a lifestyle that is packaged, pressured, processed, microwavable, portable, and disposable, we may be rushing past some important lessons ***and the teachers who can teach them***. Recently, I heard about some teenagers who want (and whose parents permitted them) to receive Botox injections to make them more beautiful. It seems there is no end to how much our culture values youth, beauty, and the “next big thing”.

Someone once said: “Age should not have its face lifted, but it should rather teach the world to admire wrinkles as the etchings of experience and the firm line of character.” This is a call for seniors to understand their still-vital role in our society and to realize and enjoy your moments of influence. Perhaps like never before, when the pace is so fast, relationships are so disposable, and the anchors are so few, we need seniors to remember and exert the influence they have to make a big difference, even in small places.

Take, for example, a teenager I know, named Olivia, who works at Arbor Ridge, our senior retirement community in Rhinebeck. Every day Olivia serves dinner to our residents. I'm sure our residents do not fully realize the impact they have made through this quiet, daily intersection. Yet the effect on Olivia's life is profound and far-reaching. To be sure, you could say that Olivia is a remarkable example...not your typical teenager.

Olivia possesses an “old soul” despite her age, her ready smile, and her unassuming beauty. “I didn’t have an easy life”, she explains, but I make a decision every day to visualize the positive. I am thankful for what I have.” Olivia has had the opportunity to travel to other parts of the world, and she says, “when you watch a child picking through a pile of garbage for a bone to eat, or you see a man with no arms and legs who is begging, you realize that money isn’t everything.” Hard working, responsible, uncomplaining, and positive: yes, Olivia is remarkable. Yet, she values the influence of the seniors in her world, and the time they give to her. “I’ve been volunteering for seniors since I was 8 years old, she continues, and I love to be around them. It is so fulfilling.” Olivia loves working at Arbor Ridge and she loves our residents. “This is the best job I have ever had”, she says, “working here is so much more than waiting on tables; it has opened my eyes to a whole new world.” Olivia describes several of the residents as her heroes. “I was talking with Anna Mae recently (a gal who is 101!), and she was telling me she didn’t have a washing machine until she was 85. Now that’s a strong woman!... I hope to be like her.....and there are others here who are so positive in spite of all they have been through. It feels so good to make them happy.”

Someone has said that “he who influences the thoughts of his times, influences all the times that follow. He has made his impress on eternity.” Olivia plans to attend a local college next year because she doesn’t want to stop working with these seniors who have come to mean so much to her. In addition, it is because of these interactions that she is choosing the field of nursing with a focus especially on geriatrics as her life’s goal.

“Older people help me go in a better direction, she says, “they take the time and give you advice that is always better.” How’s that for influence? Perhaps there is an Olivia in your world. Maybe you could invite them to hook up the DVD for you and maybe see a movie together... or bake some cookies....or work on a puzzle.