

Helping the Older Adult to Keep Related to The Mainstream of Community Life

by Jerome Kaplan.

Minneapolis, Minn., 1952

Group life is normal life. Today, the home is becoming less and less the basic unit of society for the older adult. It is, rather, the community of associates among which he moves.

Social scientists have recognized the importance of group membership as one of the prominent factors of modern social life. Belonging to a group is such a natural and accepted pattern of living that usually little attention is accorded it. All too often, only when these groups become a liability to society, are they consciously recognized. The positive force of these groups as a deterrent of individual deterioration must be advanced to include the older person who no longer has such a unit to which he may belong. That which has been an integral part of his life has vanished. The associations with others which provided the necessary stimulation to invoke continuous development of interests and abilities, subject only to the capacities of mind and body, are now gone.

It is generally suspected that the older adult deteriorates rapidly as soon as he is relegated to the scrap heap of productivity, with few opportunities to retain normal group ties. The need of belonging and being an integral part of groups begins early in life, and by the time a person is older the necessity of remaining a spoke in the wheel of the group has been bolstered by a great number of varied associations. Lack of such a group bond may easily result in maladjustment and insecurity which, in turn, may promote actions which are in conflict with accepted standards of conduct. A person without group ties lacks a definite social anchorage - yet people in the older age bracket all too frequently find their attempts to secure such an anchor frustrated. It becomes impossible for a person to adjust to a group if the group refuses to adjust to him - and, as a direct result of a great complex of factors among which has been our rapid urbanization and emphasis on a youthful America, more and more groups in our society are refusing to adjust to the older citizen. Faced on all sides by this social "cold shoulder" the senior adult's opportunity for social interactions lessens and then disappears, creating a chasm between his desire to belong and his ability to do so. The request by an 82 year old minister of "...perhaps I could be useful somewhere...", is an indictment of the paradox confronting the older adult - that of trying to remain a contributing member of a society which is taking away his opportunity to do so.

When opportunities for getting together with others are limited, it is difficult to find friends, to maintain a proper balance between physical and mental well-being and to contribute to the community.

Organizations, as the form of every human association for the attainment of a common purpose, are the instruments whereby people will work together and encourage participation in community life. It appears that there may be some place for older people in the regular activities of the many organizations. However, without special attention and special activities, very few older people will participate in the life of the community, for most opportunities are geared to meet the needs of younger people. Until the time comes when our society will have adjusted its attitudes toward the older age, I believe older people can be served more effectively by organizing centers, clubs and activities especially for their use. After becoming securely established in these group settings, the senior citizen can more easily become an integral part of the many phases of community activity and service.

One of the premises in working with older people is based on the philosophy

that a major goal in human living is contentment. This calls for continuous social adjustment which can best be achieved by living a positive and socially useful life. It has already been acknowledged that membership in a group is a primary means for senior citizens to remain contributing members of the community. It is only now that we are beginning to discover that the group offers to the older adult, too, the opportunity to keep related to the mainstream of community life.

The senior citizen club worker, who recognized the ability of a former leather worker to teach his craft to other members and eventually to all types of groups, regardless of age, achieved two things. He provided for recognition and useful activity, each a component necessary for the personal well being of both the teacher and the ones learning the craft. Seventy-four year old Mr. O. turned his former avocation of photography into his secondary occupation. It was not an immediate or abrupt change. It took a period of eighteen months; first, to interest him in a group; second, to re-build his confidence in being with all kinds of people; third, to regain his self-esteem by showing his skill to his club members; and fourth, to move into other older age clubs where he demonstrated his ability and finally to the point where he taught photography classes in his community.

Then there was Mrs. N., a 67 year old woman, who, at her initial club gathering, never said anything unless spoken to, and who finally asked to serve as her club's representative at a gathering of many organizations in the city. Only a few months earlier she had been unable to accept responsibility for the simplest of tasks. Then she began to serve coffee. When she made her request, she stated she never had a chance to do 'those things before', being a housewife, and now she 'wanted to learn'. Not long afterwards she volunteered her services to a youth serving agency.

It is countless illustrations like these that demonstrate there is a key to combating the feeling that one has no role to play in society. The report which reads, "Mrs. K. is lonely; very much interested in some old people's activity; no special interests" is a theme which has been repeated over and over again, crossing all economic barriers or other social distinctions.

It becomes increasingly clear that in helping older adults to keep related to the mainstream of community life, a two-fold approach is necessary. Every possible means should be explored to provide opportunities for those older people who are still active, to remain active. Further, there should be an intensification of effort for the "social rehabilitation" of those older people who no longer are contributing to society. Here the active older adult can find a fruitful source of satisfactions through service to those older people who have become liabilities to their community. People are living to an older age, and old age brings increasing probability of disabling illness. As a result, many older people are confined permanently or for long periods of time to their homes or in bed. The need for friendly visiting through which volunteers offer friendly help to those confined to their own homes is indicated. It is by this method that the confined older citizen may have letters written for him and read to him, may learn simple crafts and find new hobbies and interests to the limit of his capacity. Here is an enormous resource for community activity for the active older adult on behalf of his less fortunate peers. One 74 year old woman, confined to her wheel chair and bed because of arthritis had, "...tried to be cheerful and not complain about her disability, but occasionally failed in her efforts". Not long afterwards 76 year old Mrs. N. came to chat with her. Several months later the report read, "She no longer brooded... (as) she spent most of her waking hours in the wheel chair instead of in bed as she formerly did". Her visitor got her interested in knitting

mittens for her husband, even though she was handicapped by arthritis. The smile and chuckle of a feeble 90 year old in a nursing home, who eagerly awaits the regular trip of her 86 year old visitor, is the kind of reward that makes her look forward to her visits.

A city-wide hobby show for older people is a further means of spotlighting the creative ability of older people. New interests can be discovered while opportunities abound for deserved recognition, praise and status. I recall a senior citizen club that participated to a very small degree at one hobby festival. At its first group gathering after the hobby show, an 81 year old member roundly berated her club members by their lack of community spirit. The club responded to her verbal spanking by proposing and implementing plans for their part in the next hobby show. This same member had never taken a leading part in any venture. She had raised her family and devoted herself to her household tasks until she lost her husband several years back. At her first meeting Mrs. B. had stated the hours weighed heavily upon her. Now she had a consuming interest. Mrs. B. accepted the responsibility for insuring a full representation from the club in the next hobby festival and, on her own, not only initiated plans for a club hobby show but got several members to exhibit at the state fair.

At a subsequent holiday festival, the talents of those who had been active in community life were put to use. Mr. A., because of his many years in the accounting and insurance business, took over the post of treasurer, wherein he stated he 'hadn't been so happy in years'. And what a job he did in soliciting services and funds. It was reminiscent of the activities of a home for the aged which has realized its importance as a vital part of the neighborhood in which it is located as well as the community of interest to which it is attached. Here the residents solicit for the community chest campaign.

Group life does afford the opportunities for remaining a contributing member of the community. Mrs. R., who was a former organizer for a fraternal insurance organization, remarked with great feeling, "The club is a wonderful outlet to do the thing which I know best how to do". Currently, she is organizing several interest groups for older people.

It must be remembered that it is perhaps even more important to provide qualitative associations for older people than quantitative opportunities. This is true even for those older adults who have always been active, for many find increasing difficulty in remaining so. The retired teacher, who had prepared lectures on ten favorite subjects, took a new lease on constructive living when the thirty clubs for older people in his city made bids for his services - each new contact built into another. It has also become possible to interest many older people who have never really participated in any community venture, to contribute - for the first time - their time, effort and varied skills to the betterment of their neighborhood. Some have had to do it as a member of a group which acts as an entity, such as the club which went on record to secure a much needed bus service in their suburb. Again, there are those who are contributing individually, apart from the original group tie which gave them the initial push, like 79 year old Mr. H., who is now teaching Sunday school. Still further, there are those senior citizens who, at the very minimum, are not a liability to the community and who have become socially rehabilitated, as for example, Mrs. N., who refused to take care of herself. She had trouble with circulation in one of her legs. Medical expenses mounted, yet she refused to help herself. In her opinion, life was not worth the effort. Yet, she did get out of bed when directed to a neighborhood club, and when last heard

from was going to run for president.

A brief glimpse into the immediate future must include a statement about the giants of industry and labor. Their very position points toward increased recognition of their responsibilities for leadership and participation in keeping the older adult active. Present employees or union members as well as those being retired, by and large, retain their loyalty to the plant and/or union. A group, based on these loyalties, certainly can contribute in some manner to the firm or union as well as undertaking activities not directly related to their work ties. Surely there are many "fringe" activities which are considered so because of the pressure of day-to-day operations in which the group and its members may be able to assist.

Some of the outlets suggested here are the church, plant, union and philanthropic endeavors, among others. The group has been suggested as a major resource in keeping people alert, interested, curious and constructive.

Throughout life man identifies himself with the many groups to which he is bound. Group life provides the necessary fundamental support for the functioning efficiency of its members. Group identification promotes self-esteem and occasionally prestige. The individualistic concept of assuming a person can exist in the abstract and be literally independent has been negated. The group is one means of seeing that intellectual capacities are utilized to a maximum. It is one answer to meeting the need to have people function at their highest level of ability.

These, then, are some of the many parts that make up the community, yet they are inseparable to its continued functioning. It is not only possible to help the older adult keep related to the mainstream of community life - it is even more probable that he can shift the course of this stream if given equal opportunity with those of other ages.

Jerome Kaplan, Group Work Consultant
Hennepin County Welfare Board
134 Court House
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Presented at the 79th Conference of Social Work, Chicago, 1952.