**Positive ageing: every age at once**

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| By [Patricia Edgar](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/author.asp?id=6371) - posted Wednesday, 27 May 2015 |

The film *Clouds of Sils Maria*is a masterful challenge to the ageing generation who have to confront the new ideas and unthinking arrogance of youth as they fear and despair of losing relevance and vitality.

 A mature and famous actress is cast in the play that made her famous at age 18, but this time she is to play the older woman who is manipulated by her once younger self, this time played by a rising Hollywood brat.  As she rehearses her lines with her assistant she faces an identity crisis and feels she cannot cope.

A young director, pitching the lead role in his science fiction movie provides the insight she needs. ‘She is every age at once, like all of us.’

The film is dealing with the need for mutual understanding and respect between generations if we are to evolve as a civilized community given our dramatically changed demographic patterns.  It does social as well as individual damage to undermine the confidence of elders by portraying them as a burden breaking the economy; as stealing the livelihood and opportunities from those younger; as having no value if not in the paid workforce. The familiar refrain runs on a loop with little concern for elders beyond their economic impact. This is true for the recent budget, yet so much could be achieved for little expenditure.

There are some welcome efforts underway to change this gloomy prognosis through promoting positive ageing. Research has demonstrated negative stereotypes of the old, not only impact on how others view us, but on how we view ourselves. How many noticed the graphic image of the dumpy woman on a stick used to depict pensioners on the ABC’s budget commentary?

But good news has come from the ILOP Project (Improving livability for older people in small towns), a modestly funded initiative by the State Government of Victoria which has distributed $1.7 million (between 2011-2014) across 17 municipal councils to support positive ageing projects. Ten thousand older people participated in 190 separate projects defined by these local communities.

A Positive Ageing Calendar triggered my interest in the Alpine Shire in North Eastern Victoria. Twenty three people (the oldest 92) came together to portray the lead characters from iconic Australian films. They hired fabulous costumes, engaged a professional photographer, make up team and graphic designer to ensure a top quality production. Then they became the characters in *Picnic at Hanging Rock, Mad Max, The Great Gatsby, Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Babe, The Man From Snowy River, Strictly Ballroom, Crocodile Dundee, The Saphires*and more. What fun they had in the cause of exhibiting the joys of positive ageing to the wider community.

This ageing Alpine group has become The A-Team drawing on words reflecting the qualities of those they were hoping to attract: advisers, able, admirable, achievers, active, advocates, adventurous and awesome.

The A-Team has about 20 members. Meetings are called regularly in different locations across the shire by a convener, Pat Easterbrook, who has a great sense of humour and an informal style.  People will drive an hour or more each way to get there.

So why does it work? Respect is the quality that underpins everything: for each other, for the ideas they discuss, develop, implement and evaluate. People are given a genuine voice and they draw on one another’s strengths. All levels of management in the Shire are supportive of The A-Team’s role in creating a better experience for older people in a rural community.

Their achievements include the introduction of the All-Terrain wheelchair in the Alpine Shire; provision of a hoist at the Bright Sport’s Centre to enable people with a disability to access the indoor swimming pool all year round; the development of a photo library of older people in the Shire, taken by seniors and on display in the Myrtleford Library; production of mobility maps for the regional towns; production of the Positive Ageing Directory of activities in the Alpine Shire; cooking classes and social get-togethers such as High Tea classes; fitness and exercise programs; bench seating for the Bright Art Gallery; development of the Victorian Seniors’ Festival in 2014 when they had a program of 22 events held over eight days across the Shire attended by hundreds of people. The A-Team are now building on their successes and planning for the future.

In the Shires of Glenelg, Central Goldfields, Colac Otway, Surf Shire and Towong, local teams have also worked together to create projects. Each one is a small initiative but they can make a difference in a small community and lead to bigger changes over time.

The overriding contribution to the ILOP Projects’ success is that older people are the drivers, taking decisions that affect them and their communities.  So they feel empowered, engaged and motivated. As well, the projects are collaborative with partners including local clubs and organizations, health services, arts organizations, regional agencies and others, allowing these groups to engage with older people.

This process could be rolled out across Australia at modest cost. It could only lead to positive effects in communities as residents, councils, community agencies, businesses and organizations work in partnership to create more inclusive and supportive communities thus giving purpose, reducing social isolation and improving mental health for older people. Activity, not drugs, is the key.

The next step would be to design inter-generational programs that involve the young and the old, with schools participating in sustained programs. We need to change attitudes across the generations and develop more understanding perspectives, for the older generation is a resource for the young and the young have much to offer their elders.  The demographic changes we are experiencing could lead to generation-friendly communities where we are ‘every age at once’.

## About the Author

Patricia Edgar is an author, television producer and educator. She was the founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation. She is also the author of In Praise of Ageing and an Ambassador for the National Ageing Research Institute.