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MEMBER



Special needs require special lawyers.

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AMERICANS STAY ALERT TO AGEISM BY LYNNE BERG

A South Florida senior citizen, 81 years young and healthy, was not allowed to adopt two Chihuahua puppies because of his “advanced age.” This story on the Internet is just one example of ageism – discrimination against people on the grounds of age. It is a basic denial of older people’s human rights.

Robert N. Butler, M.D., a gerontologist, psychiatrist, and winner of a Pulitzer Prize, coined the term in 1968. He also founded the National Institute on Aging and leads the International Longevity Center USA (ILC). A 2006 ILC report, “Ageism in America,” describes experiences of older Americans: “widespread mistreatment, ranging from stereotyping and degrading media images to physical and financial abuse, unequal treatment in the workforce, and denial of appropriate medical care and services.”

With our aging population, ageism will impact a significant segment of society. By 2030, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that Americans 65 years of age and older will make up 20% of the population. Ageism can detrimentally affect older people’s health, employment, and psychological wellbeing.

Health

Ageism affects longevity. Yale School of Public Health professor Becca Levy and her colleagues found that older people with positive attitudes on aging lived 7.5 years longer than those with negative feelings. Data show that Americans are living longer. When Social Security was established in 1935, life expectancy was under 62 years while today it is 78 years.

Another critical issue affecting seniors’ health is the dearth of geriatricians, physicians who specialize in treating the elderly. Today, there is about one pediatrician for every 1,300 children under 18 years of age in America. While the statistic, according to the American Geriatrics Society, is one

geriatrician for every 2,600 people age 75 years and older. Physicians trained in geriatrics will know the difference between symptoms of aging and those that can be treated.

“Elderspeak” can also negatively impact medical treatment. A University of Miami psychiatrist, Marc E. Agronin, M.D., used this example: Questions about medications answered with, “Don’t worry, dear. This is what the doctor ordered.”

Employment

Because of the economic crisis, people are working longer. They are postponing retirement and competing against younger workers for lower-level positions. Laid-off older workers are out of work longer, studies found. David Certner, the chief legislative counsel for AARP, in a nytimes.com article, praised a recent Supreme Court decision in *Meacham v. Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory* that protects employees from age discrimination during layoffs. It supports the federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967 that protects anyone 40 years of age or older. The law is enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The Associated Press reported that only one-fourth of the EEOC age cases are settled on behalf of the complainant. In the 1970s, political activists worked to make mandatory retirement obsolete. Yet, it’s not uncommon for police officers and firefighters to retire in their late 50s.

Psychology

Toni Calasanti, Ph.D., professor of sociology at Virginia Tech, wrote the lead story in a recent issue of the university’s research magazine. “People want to keep passing for younger since being old affects social status,” she said in an interview. “Ageism oppresses the people we will become.” A Pew Research Center survey found that one-third of those between the ages of 65 and 74 years said they felt 10 to 19 years younger, and one-sixth of people 75 years and older said they felt 20 years younger.

Ageism may result in feelings of low self-esteem, stress, anxiety, guilt and helplessness. Dr. Butler wrote, “When the future is removed, as in the case of old age, it builds dissatisfaction, disappointment and depression.” But as Dr. Butler, noted, older adults should live lives based on hope and positive expectations.

Here are some tips for staying active:

- Keep moving – Participate in exercise, yoga, and dance classes
- Stay involved – Volunteer at schools and hospitals and for the arts. Tackle causes to help society.
- Connect with friends and family – Host a reunion. Find a long-lost soul mate.
- Learn new things – Use computers and digital cameras. Be “crafty.”
- Work longer – Look into shared jobs, flextime and phased retirement.

- Communicate more – Write or blog about life experiences and inspirations.
- Dream – Never stop setting goals and looking ahead.

MSNBC broadcasted a story of a gentleman who always dreamed of crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a raft. At age 85 years, he and three friends landed in St. Maarten after the 2,800-mile journey. “What else do you do when you get on in years?” he asked a reporter.

Keep living and dreaming.

The attorneys at Oast & Hook assist families with their estate, financial, insurance, long-term care, veterans' benefits, and special needs planning issues.

Lynne Berg is executive director of Primeplus Norfolk Senior Center located at 7300 Newport Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia 23505, (Tel: 757-625-5857). It has been serving Southside Hampton Roads seniors ages 50 years and older for more than 40 years.

Ask Allie

O&H: Allie, we know the recent tornadoes in the Midwest were devastating. We've heard you have a "good news" story for us. Please share it with our readers.

Allie: Sure! Marilyn Walden from Henryville, Kentucky, was at work on Friday, March 2nd, when a tornado hit her town. When she arrived home, she found that the storm had ravaged her living room and collapsed most of her bedroom. Worst of all, she found no sign of her cat named Bear. As the Weather Channel was filming her experiences, she called out to Bear as she sifted through the damage. Miraculously, she found Bear, alive and hiding under the bed; he was caked with dirt and debris, but was otherwise OK. To see the video of their reunion, please visit www.catsparella.com. What a great story! Time to see if the neighborhood deer are visiting again. See you next week!

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