March 17, 2018

Engaging with the Elderly Community

Dear UCSB Students,

The time is now. There will never be a moment to live in a time like this, in the seconds that just passed because you were reading the previous sentence.

But, wait! Before you go venture out into the world to embark on your next adventure, consider the following:

While you are about to board the plane to Cancun for Spring break with ten of your closest friends, your grandmother will probably be sitting in her usual chair, eating her microwaved TV dinner, while watching Wheel of Fortune for the fourth hour, all alone. This may be a daily routine, not only for your grandma but for your friends’ grandmothers as well. Do you ever wonder if she gets bored? Do you think she misses your grandpa? When was the last time you called your grandparents to see how they were doing?

Elderly loneliness is a reality for 43% of people over the age of 60, but little attention is directed towards this growing issue. Isolated elders are linked to a 59% greater risk of mental and physical decline than their more social counterparts. Although some elderly people choose to live on their own, away from their adult children and secluded from society, it is important to incorporate these individuals back into the community to remind them that they are still a functioning member of society. Not all elderly citizens are leading one of the top UC schools like Chancellor Yang or thriving on the success of TV shows and award-winning movies like Betty White. Over 25 million Americans ages 60 years and older are economically insecure, struggling with rising housing and health care bills, lack of access to transportation, diminished savings, and job loss. Sound familiar? As a college student, I am too familiar with some of these challenges. *Rising rent and bills?* Can we just take a moment to talk about the crazy rent prices in IV? *Lack of access to transportation?* \*Reminisces about the time when the bus schedule was memorized, and walking was a way to get to class\* *Diminished savings?* \*Laughs hysterically\* Where do I even begin to tell you how many snaps and retweets this question deserves? *Jobless?* Tell me about it. What do you mean I need experience? All these struggles go to say that we are not so different from the elderly population than we think.

Sometimes we may feel discouraged from calling grandma and grandpa because we simply would not know what to talk about. “I am an intelligent, educated individual on the rise. I am going places! I do not have time to talk to old people who will only slow me down…” But as you rise, do not forget to think about the people who lifted you up and helped you get to this point in your life. Perhaps a gesture of appreciation is needed after receiving that extra $20 your grandparent randomly sent you in the mail which helped you pay for a textbook that you needed.

Seniors are a critical asset to our community as they are our connections to the past. We can learn from them and gain inspiration from their experiences. They were once young people like us, wanting to live their best lives—young and carefree. But with age, there comes a point in our lives when asking for help with daily living activities become a mechanism for survival and feelings of being a burden and hopelessness are common. Thus, a simple gesture of kindness, such as a smile and greeting, or a 5-minute conversation with anyone who is not their crazy retirement-home roommate, is a whiff of fresh air that most elderly people appreciate and often yearn.

Don’t you recall a time when your college roommate just drove you a bit insane and made you want to rip all your hair out? Well, you were probably able to escape their annoyance by going home for the weekend or crashing at a friend’s house for the night. These resolutions are not available for most elderly. Most likely, the retirement home is their home. There is no escape, sanctuary, or safe-haven. In result, you learn to deal with what you get—even if that means isolating yourself from the world because you don’t want to deal with Frank, that old man who constantly accuses you of stealing his cranberry juice. And so, a visitor who is not suspicious of their every action may cheer them up.

Occasionally, we get too caught up in our own lives that we forget to call our grandparents. Midterms, papers, final projects, pint night—these are what center our immediate attention that we forget about the existing world around us. We forget about the people who are at home rooting for us to do well in school. While I am one to fish for the latest updates on which KarJenner is pregnant or search for the cutest dog video on Facebook, I have discovered some valuable life interests aside from the ‘likes’ I have clicked on social media. For instance, I find comfort in calling my grandma at least every 2 weeks. She tells me about her week, I tell her about mine. Although she may not have gone to the trendiest restaurant in town the night before, I still try to make her week sound as exciting as possible. “What?! You’re watching that Korean drama? Wow. You’re so lucky, I wish I had time to watch that too!” Occasionally grandma will throw in a few repeating stories about how dating in the mid-1950s panned out for her, but I let it slide because each time I learn a new detail—details that I collect, cherish and carry with me for the rest of my life.

Other times, you may think that you do not have a problem talking with the elderly. Rather, it’s their closed-minded, cranky, unwelcoming personalities that just makes you want to cringe and scold the elderly. Truthfully, these kinds of elderly are challenging. It can be difficult to talk to someone who holds traditional, narrow-minded perspectives that are different from your own. However, they are probably the ones who have the most to say, but no one will take the time to listen to them. Being surrounded in a college environment for so long, you get used to meeting people from all over the world who practice different cultures, religions and have a diverse political background from yours. Perhaps it’s time to acknowledge that we cannot protest every little thing that we do not agree with but learn to listen and understand our opposing views. We can learn a lot from our elders just by *listening*. Their stories can give us insight into our past and learn how we can apply their experiences to our future.

There are so many ways we can help the elderly and it begins by exploring our comfort zones. We did not let the idea of moving to a whole new town, living with complete strangers, and discovering new interests keep us from pursuing the college experience. Likewise, we should not let the fear of elderly stigmatization deter us from making a new friend. Although we may look like we are generations apart, college students and elderly people are more alike than we think. And don’t let that fact discourage you. Elderly people are “lit,” they may have a lot of personalities that they still have so much to share. What we need to remember is as we age, so do they. One day we will wish that we could remember the stories of our heritage, where we came from, how life was like in the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s. So, go call your grandparent, make a friend at the local retirement home, let them know that they are appreciated for their contribution to society. With these little steps and our involvement with the elderly community, we can enhance the way we think about ourselves, our past, and our future.

With appreciation,

Mindy Nguyen