

Aging Lifestyles: New words for old folks

by Joe_Volz

Recently, I suggested in this space that it was time to retire that irrelevant word from past centuries - "retirement."

After all, many of us don't "retire" to the front porch or the golf course when we stop getting paid for working at a full-time job. We start new careers, take part-time jobs or embark on vigorous rounds of volunteer work.

We needed a word that was, well, more 21st centuryish, I concluded. Something that reflects the vibrancy of today's elders.

Many of you readers agreed.

John Stanley, 73, still teaching at Sonoma State University and performing with the San Francisco Symphony chorus, says the right word is "rewirement."

"I get a warm rush of embarrassment when anyone asks if I'm retired," he says. "I think, of course, I'm not. Do I look that old?"

He contends, "It's like saying, 'You look wonderful,' which to me translates as 'I'm surprised you're still alive,' so I always respond I'm rewired."

In fact, a New York writer, Rick Miners, has devoted an entire book to the rewirement concept, "Don't Retire, Rewire" (Alpha/Penguin). "It's the active, new life phase, formally called retirement," he says.

Marge Spieldenner of Everett, Wash., writes that "Prime Timers" might be a good phrase. "I like it much better than seniors (are we talking about seniors in high school?)"

Marge "doesn't plan on slowing down anytime soon" but concedes, "since I worked with the geriatric set for many years, I do know that I have to have a plan in place with Plan Bs and C, just in case, for when I do need to slow down."

Marian Pec, who is "past 80," says she still works, travels and "generally runs around a lot." She says that appropriate word is "regeneration."

Astrid Johnson adds, "I like 'wizards' for our generation, don't you think?"

Meanwhile, a group of us reporters, called the Journalists Exchange on Aging, who cover aging ourselves, have come up with a glossary of some definitions that we definitely don't like.

Our glossary suggests: "Do not use baby boomers except in discussions relating to the birth years of the post-war baby boom. However, many media outlets preserve the baby fat in this generation," to the annoyance of boomers. "Many grate on the gratuitous infantilization this term, in broad use, applies to the entire generation in perpetuity."

And how about elderly?

Use only as a modifier, says the glossary. "Elder" people or "elderly" patients are all right. But the word connotes frailness. More vigorous older people, though, dislike the term "when used in general reference to all people in late life."

The glossary also warns to steer away from the term "senior citizen" because "it continues to sound euphemistically sour in the ears of many older readers."

Well, I don't know about "senior citizens." My own informal survey indicates that many in the post-65 crowd don't mind that term at all. In fact, some oldsters (is that politically correct?) are proud of it. It shows they are survivors and wiser for living so long.

And how are you going to qualify for a senior citizen discount if you deny you are a senior citizen?

This entire terminology issue does raise an interesting issue. Who gets to determine what terms we use to describe a particular age group? Should the subject decide what he wants to be called?

For example, young people, in their 20s and 30s, grimace at being called "kids," as in, "he's just a kid" but we elders use that term all the time. Should the kids be able to ban the "K word" when used for young adults?

Language is so subjective that it is difficult to come up with neutral words.

Maybe, we old geezers (is that politically correct?) are just getting a bit too sensitive about growing old. We are aging. Let's face it. But isn't everybody - even the kids, who don't have any wrinkles just yet.

E-mail Joe Volz at volzjoe2003@yahoo.com, or write to 2528 Five Shillings Road, Frederick, MD 21701

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