

By Marian L. Knapp/Guest Columnist

Wicked Local Newton

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Newton —

Almost every day as I read the newspaper, watch television, listen to the radio or look through AARP publications there is talk about the Baby Boom Generation. As we all know baby boomers are those who were born in the post WWII years between 1945 and 1964, there are a lot of them (approximately 76 million), and it is said they will change the face of aging in multiple, unknown ways.

For some time now, I have noticed my increasingly unsettled reaction whenever I hear or see the term “boomer.” Hmm, I wonder to myself and sometimes to others, “I am not a boomer. I am older than they are. Why aren’t people talking about me? Am I invisible?”

Curious about my slightly paranoid thought process, I did some investigation about my age group not even knowing what to look for. In a brief foray on the Internet, I discovered that I am part of the “Silent Generation.” How do you like that? What an unflattering label! We were born in the 20-year period 1925 and 1944. (My birth date is a little more than halfway through this cohort.) As of 2008 there were close to 39 million of us who were 65 years and older (this does not include the several million who were born in 1944). Of course our group is not as huge as the baby boomers but still represents quite an important number. Why aren’t we hearing more about us? Maybe I am missing something.

To see if my sense of not being recognized had any basis in reality, I did a little totally unscientific test. I looked at the March, 2011 AARP Bulletin and found 24 mentions of “boomer(s)” and one of the “Greatest Generation” – those who lived through the depression and fought in the 2nd World War. There were stories about older individuals who needed medical care or health insurance but not a word about us “silents” – how ironic, complete silence. Perhaps a broader investigation would reveal something different but I doubt it.

There are many things that trouble me about this. The most obvious is that most boomers who are just now turning 65 probably won’t need a lot of help until they turn 85 in 2030. Those born in 1955 will turn 85 in 2040, and so on. Yet, even though “silents” don’t make a lot of noise, we are here right now in the aging process, thinking about and experiencing it. Although we might not realize it, we have a lot of information and knowledge that could be useful for current and future planning. For example, during our lifetimes, the number of people in nursing homes decreased, particularly for those over age 85. How did we do that? We are the generation of large migrations into suburbs and the ones who are now dealing with the breakdown of neighborhood cohesiveness. We are among those attempting to rebuild these neighborhoods and create livable communities. Although we didn’t create the explosion in communications technology, we are engaged in the wave as more and more of us connect to the internet, use email, conduct searches, and keep up with the news. We adapt to change and will continue to do so.

Putting such emphasis on the boomer generation gives the impression that they are more important than we are. It suggests that they have the ability to stay forever innovative while we

sit here like plain “old folks” getting sick and needy. The lack of public awareness about our generation contributes to and heightens negative stereotypes of older people and contributes to ageism because our positive presence is not adequately promoted. Who are we, what have we accomplished, and what do we think?

So much of the media focus on the boomers is around how to stay young and avoid the unpleasant process of getting older. Ads with the message “I’ll never grow up” are offensive to me and imply that being older, experienced, and balanced is a bad thing. The vast anti-aging industry that markets to boomers, plays into the fear of aging and creates the illusion that we can stay youthful and eternally fit. We can’t. Sooner or later, all of us will face some decline. Of course, it is good to push this off for as long as possible and do things that will contribute to wellness and longevity but we can’t delude ourselves that we will be young forever.

The media that pushes the idea that the boomers will change things may be true at some level but we “silents” are at the forefront of change. Unfortunately, we don’t have a clear self-identity around which to rally. This is understandable. Who wants to associate themselves with a bunch of passive silent people? But we are doing our and future generations a disservice by not identifying ourselves as a potent group, which, through our experiences, can offer valuable perspectives on what it means to get older with thoughtfulness, creativity, and dignity. All of you “silents” out there contact me at marianlknapp@gmail.com. Join me and let’s start talking!

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and caregiver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia.” She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging.

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