

Not Every Senior Wants to Retire

Senior Digest, December 2014

Jeanne was a soccer (and baseball and basketball) mom my wife and I used to meet frequently at our son's youth sports events. Her oldest boy and our son were the same age and played on several teams together. We hadn't seen her in quite a few years when we encountered her at the grocery store recently. After sharing news about what our adult children were up to, we compared notes on "what's next?" My wife explained that she was retiring in February 2015 at age 69, but that I was planning to continue working after reaching age 70 next April. Jeanne responded that although she was 70, she continued to work in her job in a public school. "Even though I don't need to work, I just love my job," she said.

Later, thinking about that conversation, I was struck that Jeanne felt the need to explain why she was still working. After reflecting further, I recalled doing the same thing at my 50th high school class reunion in 2013 at age 68. I found myself trying to explain to former classmates why I was still working. Most of them had already retired. I guess one reason I felt an explanation was necessary was to counter any assumptions that I was still working because I hadn't saved enough to retire, rather than by choice because I liked my job. It was difficult to explain during brief conversations why I loved my work as a community organizer and wanted to keep doing it for as long as possible. I don't recall anyone saying, "Boy, I wish I could still do my old job."

But I believe there was more to Jeanne's and my need to explain why we were still working. As seniors we are bombarded constantly with commercials selling a plethora of services and products-- everything from investment advice, retirement planning, sea cruises, and condos to vitamins and other products to keep us healthy. These narratives show tanned, very fit and well-groomed younger seniors being active in warm environments: at a beach, on a tennis court, golf course or a river cruise. I wonder why they're almost never skiing. Anyhow, the ad's message is "your work is over and thank goodness for that---now it's time to spend and play!" Certainly not everyone buys into this stuff, but I believe we're all affected by these messages to some degree. That's why companies spend millions on them. So it's understandable that we who are still working can be a teeny bit defensive around non-believers as we continue to swim against the tide, doing work that we love. We feel a need to explain why we aren't following many of the crowd.

Barbara Howard's keynote at our recent Senior Conference and Expo conveyed the message that many of us have a deep hunger to do more meaningful things with our lives in the years remaining to us. But she added that we are all unique, and for each of us the task is to fulfill our own uniqueness. For some of us, that meaning may be found in keeping on keeping on---without needing to explain.