

The Beauty of Aging: A Journey to a New Passion and Vision of Aging: Aging Today: The American Society of Aging, July-August 2010

By Laurie Schur

In mid-life, I felt an inner stirring to do something new and differently creative than my current work, psychotherapy. While I love psychotherapy's realm of deep connections and the chance to help people, I wanted to express another part of myself. In my mid-50s, this yearning took me on a path to find my new passion.

I enrolled in a documentary film class at UCLA Extension and was hooked. The opportunity to delve into a topic and create a visual expression of it on film excited me. I also perceived documentary as a way to immerse myself in a culture and help people through a creative medium.

I studied documentary via classes, workshops and interning on other people's film projects. What I didn't realize when I started this journey was how "out there" this new career would be. I was thrown into the world of directing, producing and fundraising—a far cry from sitting quietly and listening to clients.

At times, my introverted self would feel uncomfortably pushed and prodded. I had not envisioned the discomfort that has accompanied my new challenge. Yet I remind myself that growth and expansion are not always comfortable. I do the things I recommend to my psychotherapy clients: I take quiet time to replenish and center myself. I consult with friends and colleagues. And then I get back on the horse.

A Film to Educate and Inspire

After two years of documentary education, I decided to make a film. I was approaching my 60s and was drawn, not surprisingly, to the topic of aging. My mother died suddenly and unhappily before her 64th birthday, and I had many questions and fears about aging. Would I follow my Mom's path? What did it take to live well into old age? Were there women who could show me the way?

These and other questions led me on a quest to find women who were living longer and happier than my mother. I wanted to know their aging "secrets." What qualities could help me bring meaning and substance to my own journey into old age? I was confident that this topic would be helpful to other women. While I wasn't sure of the film's content, I knew that I wanted it to educate and inspire.

Through my personal network and contacts in the documentary community, I sought out older women who, despite challenges, were living life fully. From this search and my own inner explorations came *The Beauty of Aging*, a one-hour documentary (still in production) starring vital American women of diverse ethnic backgrounds who are in their 80s, 90s and 100s.

The seven women I have filmed have faced much stress: the death of a child, heartbreak and encounters with their own mortality. But what shines through in the interviews and verite footage is their resilience and incredible attitudes. The finished documentary will portray slice-of-life portraits of these women, interweaving their stories around themes such as relationships, creativity, activity, wisdom, sexuality, spirituality and meaning, health and loss.

Being able to film these women has been an incredible gift. Psychoanalyst Hedda Bolgar, the oldest woman in the film at age 101, particularly inspires me. When she was 98, Hedda felt she was frail, so she hired a personal trainer. She continues to make new friends and speaks out about the benefits of aging, including the freedom to be oneself without concern for what others think. Hedda stays engaged and open to life and still sees patients every week.

Then there is Lavada Campbell. She is dynamic, spirited, energetic and self-confident. She believes it is important to stay active in life and not to give up. A former hairdresser and now a minister who does spiritual counseling, Lavada practices what she preaches: At age 86, she is pursuing a new career in publishing. Though she recently completed chemotherapy for lung cancer, Lavada does not focus on her illness, but sees it as another of life's "growth spurts."

Slow, Steady Progress

My project is now in its fourth year, and I am making slow but steady progress. I have experimented with different story versions for the film while facing the filmmaker's perennial challenge—lack of funding. Though the financial aspect is discouraging at times, I persevere because of a passion for my topic, the women I have filmed and by working on smaller pieces of the project.

In 2008, I made *Greedy for Life*, a documentary short about two of the women, Shirley and Lavada. The film, chosen as one of the January 2009 selections of Spiritual Cinema Circle (www.spiritualcinemacircle.com), has been well-received during its screenings at the 2008 Aging in America Conference and at documentary salons. Marrying my psychotherapy profession with film, I use the film at seminars and workshops as a basis of discussion about aging well.

Words of Wisdom

The women in *The Beauty of Aging* are optimistic and wise, and whenever I feel discouraged about finishing the film, I remember their words of wisdom. I am gratified that people who have viewed my work have been uplifted; women regularly send me e-mails saying that after watching the footage on my website they feel better about aging and getting old.

The Beauty of Aging is serving my main intentions: to inspire and to educate. My passion and commitment to the film's message—and my transformation into a woman with more faith about the possibilities of a longer, happier life---keep me going.