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Encore Nation

By Mitch Anthony

This past fall, I was able to attend the Encore gathering (organized by Encore.org) in Tempe, Ariz. This gathering of individuals from various realms (academia, nonprofit, etc.) were rallying around the idea that those beyond 60 years of age still have something significant to contribute in our world. The event kicked off with the “Purpose Prize” dinner, where individuals who are making a unique contribution to their community in their encore phase of life were granted prizes of up to \$100,000. Some of the Purpose Prize winners included:

- Charles Irvin Fletcher: After stepping down as the head of his own telecommunications company, Fletcher used his ranch to launch a global network of 91 therapeutic riding centers, SpiritHorse International, serving 5,000 children with disabilities—free of charge.
- Dr. Pamela Cantor: Sponsored by the Eisner Foundation, this psychiatrist leads Turnaround for Children Inc., which helps schools counter the effects of poverty on student learning, reaching tens of thousands of teachers and children in 86 low-performing public schools.
- Kate Williams: As her sight faded to near-blindness, Williams worried about losing her career and her independence. She now uses the same adaptive technology that kept her in the workforce to help blind people find jobs.
- Richard Joyner: Rev. Joyner’s thriving, 25-acre community garden, part of the Conetoe Family Life Center, is steadily improving the health of his rural congregation, boosting students’ high-school graduation rates and economic potential—and providing a model for more than 20 church communities.

The Purpose Prize, now in its ninth year, is the nation's pre-eminent large-scale investment in people over 60 who are combining their passion and experience for social good. Since its inception, the Purpose Prize has garnered over 10,000 nominations, honored 465 winners and fellows, and attracted millions of dollars in new resources for winners to expand their projects. The Purpose Prize is awarded to individuals creating new ways to solve tough social problems. The 2014 Purpose Prize awarded \$300,000 to six individuals by Encore.org, with funding from the John Templeton Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies to showcase the value of experience and disprove outdated notions that innovation is the sole province of the young. It's for those with the drive to make change and the experience to know how to do it.

Encore Nation and the Purpose Prize owe their origins to a modern dreamer who has dared to challenge our contemporary culture's collective biases about age and usefulness. I'm referring to Marc Freedman, a soft-spoken, incisive and indefatigable visionary who has dedicated his life to changing our view of the second half of life. I first read about Marc in 2000 while researching the first edition of my book, *The New Retirementality*. Freedman was running Civic Ventures (which would later be named Encore.org), and I found an immediate resonance in a quote attributed to him that we could do better for our senior citizens than to have them licking stamps and sealing envelopes.

I had never bought into the idea that "staying busy" was a good enough description for a "retired" life. "Busy doing what?" is what I often ask people. If the things that are keeping you "busy" are below your competency and experience grade and do not challenge your capabilities, then you're actually not doing yourself a service. You'll end up bored and feeling less useful. The world tells those past 62 that it is now time to move from a life of contributing to a life of consuming—but the consuming often consumes them. This is the reason I rail so vehemently about modern retirement assumptions and policies; they marginalize people in our society that still have something substantive to contribute.

Marc Freedman has become the Pied Piper of an anti-ageist revolution of sorts where gray-headed "social entrepreneurs"—a term I heard used gratuitously at the Encore gathering—are bucking a system that says you should be content playing your life away upon reaching 65 years of age. They are pushing back on this assumption with the collective force of their experience, savvy and willpower.

For all the good we've seen from Encore Nation so far, we haven't seen anything yet. There are many more invitations yet to be sent to this party. Consider this article as an

invitation for you to get involved in a meaningful way by entering into a new type of retirement dialogue with your clients. You can gain your citizenship simply by engaging in a more vibrant dialogue about meaning, purpose and relevance. The ageist views permeating our society go hand in hand with the concept of retirement, which sold our culture on the idea that one's age was the paramount indicator of one's usefulness. It is high time to rebuke such prejudice and to engage people in their 60s with a conversation on "encore engagement."

As it stands, our retirement policies imply that one is "used up" or depleted by the age of 65. It's important to note that in 1935, if you were 65 years of age, there was more than an 80% chance you were still working. Before institutionalized retirement came to the fore, one had to be physically incapable of working to stop contributing. Our corporate cultures and our culture at large are still hanging on to the remnants of shortsighted ageist approaches. Age is irrelevant if one's mind, body and heart are still engaged and up to the challenge.

I love the idea of compounding wealth as an analogy. When does wealth (that has been accumulating) see its greatest multiplication and compounding? It happens in later years. Regrettably, it is at this critical point of amplification that many retirees start "drawing down" on their assets and undoing the potential compounding that would have taken place, say between 62 and 70 years of age. And consider the compounding effect of knowledge, experience and wisdom. Just because one turns 62 is no good reason to "unplug" from society.

I want to remind you once again of the difference between evolution and revolution. Evolution is what is going to eventually happen. We see the signs of what is emerging. Revolution is when I decide to do something to expedite the matter. The encore revolution is well under way ... and those involved are hastening the pace of change in our society.

Mitch Anthony is the author of The New Retirementality (Wiley), now in its fourth edition.