

# I NEED YOU, YOU NEED ME:

THE YOUNG, THE OLD, AND WHAT  
WE CAN ACHIEVE TOGETHER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAY 2017



**generations  
united**

Because we're stronger together

THE  
EISNER  
FOUNDATION 

## ABOUT GENERATIONS UNITED

The mission of Generations United is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all. For nearly three decades, Generations United has catalyzed cooperation and collaboration among generations, evoking the vibrancy, energy, and sheer productivity that result when people of all ages come together. We believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if age diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged.

**To learn more about Generations United, please visit [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).**

## ABOUT THE EISNER FOUNDATION

The Eisner Foundation identifies, advocates for, and invests in high-quality and innovative programs that unite multiple generations for the betterment of our communities. The Eisner Foundation was started in 1996 by Michael D. Eisner, then Chairman and CEO of The Walt Disney Company, and his wife, Jane, to focus their family's philanthropic activities. The Eisner Foundation gives an estimated \$7 million per year to nonprofit organizations based in Los Angeles County. In 2015, The Eisner Foundation became the only U.S. funder investing exclusively in intergenerational solutions.

**To learn more about The Eisner Foundation, please visit [www.eisnerfoundation.org](http://www.eisnerfoundation.org).**

## ABOUT THE SURVEY AND REPORT

A Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey was conducted online by Harris Poll from February 15 to 17 among 2,171 U.S. adults ages 18 and older. This survey is not based on a probability sample; therefore, no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

For complete survey methodology, including weighting variables, please contact Emily Patrick, project manager at Generations United, at [epatrick@gu.org](mailto:epatrick@gu.org).

**For details on all other sources, please consult the full report at <http://www.gu.org/RESOURCES/PublicationLibrary/INeedYouYouNeedMe.aspx>**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Generations United gratefully acknowledges the following dedicated individuals whose work and support made this report possible:

**Olivia Gentile** for her fantastic work researching and authoring this report.

The following people generously shared their time and insight in interviews and correspondence with her: **Zane Bail**, Northland Foundation; **Jamillah Bakr**, Cuyamaca College Intergenerational Garden; **Nouf Bazaz**, International Cultural Center, World Organization for Resource Development and Education; **Kat Burton**, Ithaca College; **Yvonne Campbell**, San Pasqual Academy; **Drew Christensen**, AGE to age; **Thelma Collins**, mayor of Itta Bena, Miss.; **Jeanine Dahl**, Northland Foundation; **Lindsay Dolce**, Reading Corps; **Gladys Fant**, Itta Bena, Miss.; **Cathy Feldkamp**, St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care; **Karen Frandsen**, St. Ann Center; **Hal Garman**, Gaithersburg Beloved Community Initiative; **Lynn Haglin**, Northland Foundation; **Nancy Henkin**, Generations United; **Emily Laino**, Ithaca College; **Kusum Lele**, DOROT; **Bob McCune**, Longview; **Tracy McGinnis**, Southminster; **Erin McGrath**, Senior Corps; **Mark Meridy**, DOROT; **Linda Merrill**, St. Ann Center; **Lizzie Morris**, Reading Corps; **Joanne Newsome**, Senior Corps; **Deborah Parkinson**, DOROT; **Pam Plimpton**, San Diego County; **Christine Pogorzala**, Ithaca College; **Ross Ramos**, San Diego County; **Zahra Riaz**, International Cultural Center; **Casey Rozanski**, St. Ann Center; **Nadine S. Schnettler**, ROCORI Senior Center; **Sharon Selz**, St. Ann Center; **Atalaya Sergi**, Jumpstart; **Pamela Smith**, San Diego County; **Audrey Stein**, DOROT; **Judith Turner**, DOROT; and **Moyra Woodward**, San Diego County.

Special thanks to Generations United staff **Emily Patrick**, **Donna Butts**, **Sheri Steinig**, **Jaia Lent**, and **Alan King** for envisioning, leading, and managing the survey, the report, and the release event for this significant contribution to the intergenerational field. Additional thanks to **Adam Hlava**, **Mary Harris**, and **Adam Otto** for their support on the release event.

Thank you to the following Advisory Group members for their valuable guidance, expertise, and feedback during this process: **Maria Cruz-Saco**, Connecticut College; **Rob Dugger**, ReadyNation; **Jatrice Martel Gaiter**, Volunteers of America; **Jasmine Hicks**, Young Invincibles; **Eric Kingson**, Syracuse University School of Social Work; **Joan Lombardi**, international expert on child development and social policy; **Chelsea Mason**, The Eisner Foundation; **Eunice Lin Nichols**, Encore.org; **John Rother**, National Coalition on Health Care; **Trent Stamp**, The Eisner Foundation; **Gene Steuerle**, The Urban Institute; and **Fernando Torres-Gil**, UCLA Center for Policy Research on Aging.

Finally, Generations United is grateful to **The Eisner Foundation**, whose support made this project possible and whose commitment to intergenerational solutions is inspirational.

### Design & Layout

Six Half Dozen Design Studio / Alexandria, Virginia

### Photos

On the cover: A preschooler and an elder celebrate Christmas together at the St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care in Milwaukee. *Photo by Cathy Feldkamp.*

On page 1: In schools around the country, "Foster Grandparents" are supporting children both emotionally and academically. This shot is from an elementary school in Denver. *Photo by the Corporation for National and Community Service.*

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**W**hen she was in her mid-80s, Kusum Lele lost interest in everything.

“I love my Indian classical music,” says Lele, a retired geneticist who lives in New York City and is now in her early 90s. “I used to listen to it all day.”

But for five or six years, “I could not stand it,” she says. “I would not get up to turn my stereo on.”

She wasn’t going out much, either. She’d once enjoyed eating lunch and knitting at a nearby senior center, but now, the noise there irritated her, and walking was getting harder and harder.

In general, Lele was tired, with “no inclination to do anything.”

“I didn’t have any motivation for six years,” she says.

She was still making it to the doctor, however, because she’d connected with DOROT, a non-profit that serves elders in Manhattan and its suburbs. Whenever she scheduled a new appointment, she’d call DOROT, and a social worker there would book a staff member to escort her.

One day in 2015, the social worker called with a proposal.

“She said, ‘There is a young girl, about 24 ... she works, but on Saturdays she can visit you for one hour,’” recalls Lele, who never married or had children.

“I said, ‘I like that! I like to be with young people.’”

The “young girl” was Lian Zucker, a recent college graduate who’d signed up for DOROT’s “friendly visiting” program.

And as soon as Lele met her, she began to come back to life.

“The first time she came, we were non-stop talking,” Lele says. “Oh my gosh, she had so much enthusiasm!”

They talked about India, where Lele was born and raised. They talked about Israel, where Zucker was born, and California, where she grew up. They talked about their careers, their families, and what they liked to cook.

The next week, Lele turned back on her music.

“She gave me back my motivation, because she is young, enthusiastic,” Lele says. “Lian is wonderful. Wonderful, I tell you!”

Zucker values the relationship, too.

“All my friends know about Kusum,” she says. “Everyone at work knows about Kusum. Some people say things to me like, ‘Oh yeah, you’re a saint,’ and I say, ‘No, no, I’m really not a saint! I do something really, really fun every Saturday.’”

“We come from extremely different backgrounds, we grew up in different times—and our relationship just has nothing to do with all that. We lose ourselves.”

“I feel like I’ve known her my entire life.”



## WHY THE YOUNG AND THE OLD MUST UNITE

Around the United States, intergenerational friendships are the exception rather than the rule: for the most part, age segregation prevails.

Kids spend their days at school, mostly among peers born the same year they were. Young and middle-aged adults cluster at work. And elders gather for clubs, classes, and meals that often expressly bar the young. Millions of college students and elders live in age-restricted housing, and most American neighborhoods skew young or old. Strikingly, in a recent Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey of adults nationwide, more than half of respondents—53 percent—said that aside from family members, few of the people they regularly spend time with are much older or much younger than they are. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 appear to be the most isolated from other generations, with 61 percent reporting a limited number of much older or much younger acquaintances.

It wasn't always this way: in early America, the generations mixed pretty freely, even though high mortality rates in middle age kept the population of elders small. But in the late nineteenth century, Americans began to recognize both children and elders as vulnerable populations that deserved public protection, a shift that was soon reflected in new policies and institutions. Schooling became compulsory; child labor was banned; and, thanks to Social Security and Medicare, retirement became a standard phase of life.

Because of these changes, children and elders thrived as never before. But, inadvertently, the changes also consigned both groups to isolation—from mainstream society and from one another.

Fortunately, Americans still believe that kids and elders merit special treatment. A phenomenal 93 percent of adults think children and youth are a vulnerable population that society has an obligation to protect, the new Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey shows, while 92 percent believe the same about elders.

But now, we realize that protection should not equal isolation.

Children and youth benefit from building relationships with elders in their communities, agree 93 percent of adults, the new survey shows; elders benefit from these relationships as well, agree 91 percent. In fact, most adults—78 percent—believe the federal government should invest in programs that bring together young and old Americans. And 77 percent of adults wish there were more opportunities in their own community for people from different age groups to meet and get to know one another.

Scholars, too, are calling for age barriers to be eased—for everyone's sake.

For one thing, when the generations don't mix, it's easy for them to see one another as rivals, social scientists say. By contrast, when people of all ages get to know one another, they tend to unite around shared goals instead.

Age segregation also gives rise to ageism. If the generations were better integrated, we would all be less fearful of and more empathic toward people who are much older or younger than we are.

Besides, research shows, blending the generations saves taxpayers money: why should a community build a teen center on one end of town and a senior center on the other when it would be cheaper if they shared a roof? When kids and elders are served at a single facility rather than at two separate ones, costs per client tend to decline.

Most significantly, age segregation is denying the young and the old crucial opportunities to serve one another and their communities, scholars say.

While many elders face significant challenges, older Americans generally enjoy more financial security and better physical health than they used to. With their careers winding down and their basic needs met, they're looking to contribute to the public good. But too often, there's no clear path for them to follow, since old age is still structured as a time of retreat.

Meanwhile, our children and youth are hurting. Twenty-one percent of U.S. kids live in poverty, even though the overall poverty rate is only 14 percent; another 22 percent of children are nearly poor. Poor kids are far more likely than their peers to struggle both academically and emotionally, and their parents are often under enormous strain. Many would benefit from effective tutoring and mentoring—which, in an age-integrated society, elders could be mobilized to provide.



**An elementary school student makes art with an elder in Moose Lake, Minnesota, where the “AGE to age” initiative has brought young and old together.**

*Photo by Scott Strebbe for the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation.*

With greater age integration, young people could also be mobilized to help elders, particularly those who are isolated and lonely. In one survey, nearly half of elders reported feeling lonely at least occasionally, while 19 percent reported frequent loneliness. Recently, scientists have linked loneliness to depression, cognitive decline, high blood pressure, and premature death; it may be worse for us than obesity and just as bad as smoking. If isolated elders enjoyed regular visits from energetic young people, their loneliness could be eased and their health boosted. At the same time, their visitors would derive the satisfaction that accompanies productive service to society—a satisfaction that, for too long, both the young and the old have been denied.



# INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE CHANGING LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

The public wants the young and the old to come together, and scholars have pinpointed why they must.

Dismantling age segregation won't be easy; social change never is.

But a scattering of pioneers in both the public and private sectors have already begun the work of reuniting the generations, and they're reaping extraordinary results. Through carefully designed "intergenerational programs" in towns and cities around the country, kids are getting the attention they need, elders are finding purpose and connection, and the two groups are working together to make their communities better places to live.

**Here are some exciting examples:**

DOROT, the organization that connected Kusum Lele and Lian Zucker, mobilizes more than 7,000 volunteers—many of them children, teens, and young adults—to serve 3,000 isolated elders in the New York City area annually. Hundreds of these volunteers visit with the same homebound elder every week. Others deliver holiday packages to elders, make birthday cards for them, and escort them to museums and movies.

“Social isolation and loneliness really have devastating consequences, and what our programs largely do, for many, is they provide a sense of purpose,” said Mark Meridy, DOROT’s executive director. “They provide a sense of purpose for the older adults as well as the volunteers.”

In San Diego County, where the local government has declared age integration a core community value, a team of five “intergenerational coordinators” supports dozens of programs that mobilize elders on behalf of struggling kids.

“We really wanted to say, ‘Wait a minute, we need to step back and realize that never before in the history of the world have we had this many people live this long who are this well educated, who are this capable, who have this much to offer,’” said Pamela Smith, who used to run the county’s department of aging services. “And that we really needed to start looking at the resources that older adults bring to the table.”

For example, a crew of about ten elders lives on the campus of San Pasqual Academy, a boarding school for foster teens. The “grandparents” pay below-market rent in return for devoting themselves to the kids.

One grandma, Jean Cornwell Wheat, is a painter and sculptor who collaborates with students on art projects and takes them to museums, plays, and poetry slams off campus. “Most of the foster kids have never experienced anything like that,” said Wheat. “It just opens up the world a little bit more for them.”

But primarily, she said, “I am just there to love them.”

Hal Garman, 81, of Gaithersburg, Maryland, has teamed up with some neighbors in his retirement community and with a nonprofit that serves immigrant and Muslim youth to launch a series of “Courageous Conversations” between elders who faced discrimination in the past and kids who are facing it now.

“The whole point of this is to show the kids that other people have been through some pretty difficult times, and these people lived through it ... and [that] maybe there’s a constructive way that they can handle what’s happening to them,” said Garman, a retired pastor.

Zahra Riaz, 18, who is Muslim and wears a hijab, was particularly grateful for some advice she got from a 90-year-old survivor of the Japanese internment who now lives near Garman in Asbury Methodist Village.

“She said, ‘Don’t be bitter in life. You’ll go through a lot of things; people will try to break you. But you have to try to be positive, and you have to move on with a smile on your face.’”

“Before that, whenever somebody would call me a terrorist, I would respond; I would say something demeaning as well. But then after that when there were times where somebody was staring at me for too long or looking me up and down, I would just ignore them. I would just smile at them.”

Some intergenerational initiatives galvanize elders to serve kids; some galvanize kids to serve elders.

“AGE to age,” which operates in 16 small towns in rural northeastern Minnesota, galvanizes each to serve the other and to tackle their community’s most pressing problems.

At each site, the Northland Foundation works intensively with a team of 20 or so kids, elders, educators, and other officials to identify local needs and opportunities. Each team then receives staff support and seed money from Northland to bring its ideas to life.

For example, the AGE to age team in Moose Lake decided to revitalize a blighted park. After thousands of volunteer hours, “Generations Park,” as it’s been christened, is the crown jewel of the community, with a butterfly garden, a pavilion, picnic tables, and a farmer’s market.

“Everybody has something to give,” said Lynn Haglin, Northland’s vice president. “It’s just about helping them figure out what that is.”

Many of the youngest Americans attend daycare. So do many of the oldest. What if kids and elders who needed care during the day spent this time together rather than apart?

They do at the St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care in Milwaukee, which was founded by visionary nun and nurse Edna Lonergan in 1999. Each of the center’s two campuses—one on the south side of town and one on the north—serves preschoolers and frail or isolated elders from morning to evening every weekday. Twice a day, there’s a formal intergenerational activity or class, and there’s plenty of casual mixing, too.

Linda Merrill, 68, who’s been disabled for more than a decade due to multiple sclerosis, credits St. Ann with lifting her out of depression seven years ago. Merrill had been spending her days at home alone, which “wasn’t a real good idea,” she said.

Now, she’s surrounded by friends of all ages.

“You do things with your friends—you play cards, you play games, you take walks, sometimes it’s just laugh all day long.”

“That makes it where you want to get up in the morning and come here.”



In Proctor, Minnesota, elders are helping kids learn to read as part of the town's "AGE to age" initiative.  
*Photo by Scott Streble for the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation.*

Young and old also come together daily at Longview, a cutting-edge retirement community in upstate New York that was founded in partnership with Ithaca College.

A short walk or shuttle ride from campus, Longview buzzes with students.

"Have you ever gone into nursing homes and you see people sitting around in wheelchairs with their heads on their chests?" said Bob McCune, 87, a retired pastor who moved to Longview with his wife a few years ago because they were feeling isolated in their rural home. "And it's just so depressing? Well, with those kids around here, it's not depressing; it's very lively."

Student musicians and dancers stage performances for residents; history and journalism majors consider their life stories. Gerontology scholars ask them what it's like to grow old, while budding physical, occupational, recreational, and speech therapists help assess and treat their ailments. Meanwhile, Longview residents swim in the college's pool, use its library, attend plays and other campus shows, and audit any courses they like.

"I'm learning a lot and having a great time," said McCune. "It's just a matter of joy."

# 1 WE LIVE IN AN AGE-SEGREGATED SOCIETY



of American adults say that few of the people they regularly spend time with outside their family are much older or younger than they are.

## Approximately 6 in 10

American neighborhoods skew young or old.



## Negative impacts of age segregation:

- Gives rise to ageism.
- Makes it harder to develop sense of solidarity across society.
- Perpetuates racial, ethnic, and political divides.
- Wastes taxpayer money.
- Denies old and young crucial opportunities to learn from and help one another.

# 2 BUT WE KNOW THAT WE NEED EACH OTHER

## 2 in 3

adults would like to spend more time with people outside their age group.

## More than 3 in 4

wish there were more opportunities in their community for people from different age groups to meet and get to know one another.



of adults believe that elders benefit from building relationships with children and youth.



believe that children and youth benefit from building relationships with elders.

# Nearly 9 in 10

adults believe community programs that serve kids and older adults actually end up benefiting everyone.



WE WANT  
THE YOUNG  
AND THE OLD  
TO UNITE

3

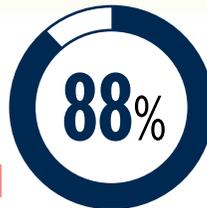


## For example, people want to see more...

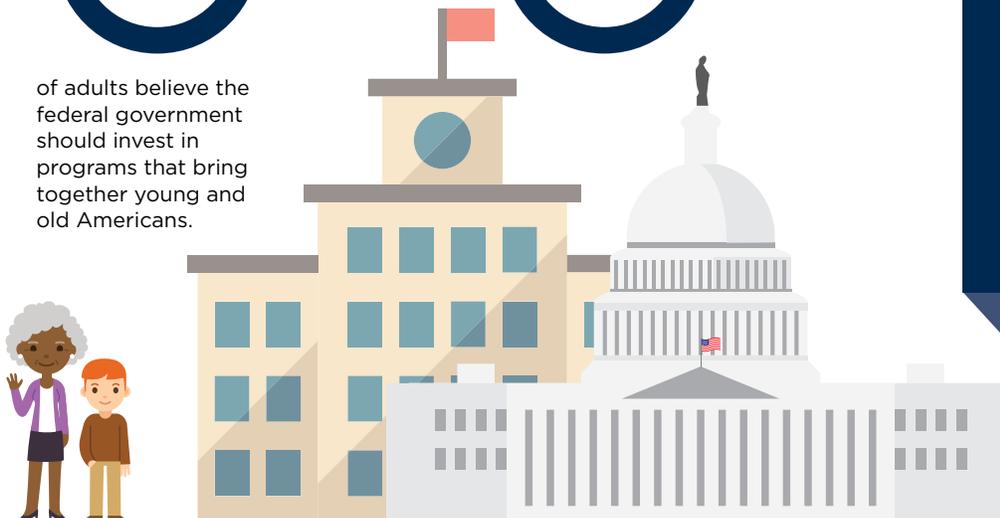
- parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers that cater to all ages (61%).
- elders mentoring and tutoring children and youth (60%).
- youth visiting and helping elders in their homes (60%).
- children and youth teaming up with elders to make art and music (50%).
- dialogues between youth and elders about immigration and race relations (38%).



of adults believe the federal government should invest in programs that bring together young and old Americans.



want the federal government to invest in the wellbeing of both children and elders.



HERE'S HOW  
TO MAKE IT  
HAPPEN

4

## What you can do to unite the young and the old:

- Launch a grassroots intergenerational movement in your community.
- Lobby your local government to make age integration a core value.
- Call on organizations that serve the young to collaborate with those that serve the old.
- Urge local foundations to support intergenerational programs.

For sources, please consult the full report at <http://www.gu.org/RESOURCES/PublicationLibrary/INeedYouYouNeedMe.aspx>



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO UNITE THE YOUNG AND THE OLD

Around the country, kids and elders are coming together for exceptional intergenerational programs that benefit everyone.

But what if these programs were the rule, not the exception? What if every college campus, retirement home, and daycare center welcomed both the young and the old? What if every neighborhood mobilized its young people to visit homebound elders and its elders to mentor struggling kids? What if people of all ages in communities nationwide joined forces for the common good?

Maybe you live in a tiny town. Maybe you live in a big city. Maybe you're a student, a parent, or a retiree.

It doesn't matter where you live or who you are: you can do something to bring the generations closer.

Here are some ideas.

### **Launch a grassroots intergenerational movement in your community.**

Using a six-step process developed by the Northland Foundation ([www.northlandfdn.org](http://www.northlandfdn.org)), build a team of kids, elders, and local movers and shakers to unite around shared goals. Start with a relatively easy project, such as a community celebration or dialogue, and aim higher as you gain momentum.

### **Lobby your local government to make age integration a core value.**

San Diego has led the way. Now, local governments nationwide should create programs, facilities, and policies that unite the young and the old. To lead this effort, every municipality should designate at least one intergenerational coordinator and appoint an intergenerational council comprising volunteers of all ages.

Inform your local leaders that intergenerational programs benefit residents of all ages while saving taxpayers money. Find out more about intergenerational governing from the Generations United toolkit "Creating an Age-Advantaged Community" ([www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)).

### **Call on organizations that serve the young to collaborate with those that serve the old.**

Chances are, there's at least one school in your community. Chances are, there's at least one senior center. How can the institutions work together? Is there an opportunity for them to share space?

If there's both a retirement home and a college in your community, tell the leaders of these institutions about the vibrant partnership between Longview and Ithaca and suggest that they team up, too.



In New York City, kids and elders who love chess come together at DOROT.  
*Photo by DOROT.*

**Challenge your local board of education to integrate elders into every school.**

If you're a student or a teacher, try to get a pilot program going yourself. Alternatively, set up a "friendly visiting" program like DOROT's that deploys students to visit elders in their homes.

**Urge residents of retirement communities to mobilize on behalf of local kids.**

If you live in a retirement home, tell your neighbors about what's happening at Asbury Methodist Village. What problems are kids near you facing, and how could you step in to help?

**Urge local foundations to support intergenerational programs.**

Funders should invest in projects that transcend rather than reinforce age barriers. For more detailed suggestions, check out the Generations United publication "Stronger Together: A Call to Innovation for Funders of Children, Youth, Families, and Older Adults" ([www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)).

**If you're over age 50, connect with Generation To Generation.**

Do you want to volunteer with children? At the Generation To Generation website ([generationtogenation.org](http://generationtogenation.org)), you'll find out where you're needed.

**Lobby your state government to take on age integration.**

Ask your governor to hire an intergenerational ombudsperson, appoint an intergenerational task force, and convene a statewide summit on intergenerational strategies.

Urge officials to create more opportunities for elders to volunteer in school districts statewide. For example, elders could assist children with special needs by serving on their Individualized Education Program team.

Urge officials to integrate elders into public colleges and universities, too. For instance, senior housing could be developed on or near campuses, and elders could be invited to audit classes.



Kids and elders grow fruits and vegetables together at a preschool in San Diego County.  
*Photo by Pam Plimpton.*

### **Lobby your Congressional representatives to take on age integration.**

The Older Americans Act and the Housing for Older Persons Act, which fund senior centers and senior housing complexes, could be amended to encourage intergenerational programs in these facilities. There are already provisions in the Older Americans Act to stimulate the development of shared sites, but these provisions haven't been sufficiently funded.

Congress should also support the Social Innovation Fund of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which finances cost-effective, evidence-based volunteer programs around the country.

### **Make new friends.**

If you're like many Americans, most of the people you spend time with outside your family are roughly your age.

Branch out.

Smile at someone much older or younger than you. Start a conversation with an older neighbor. Throw a party that includes babies, nonagenarians, and everyone in between.

You never know what will happen from there.

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