

No Respect by Dan Jacoby

America is getting older.

According to the Census Bureau, the median age of Americans rose from 32.9 to 35.3 between 1990 and 2000. At that rate, by 2030 the median age will be over 40 – and still rising. More importantly, the number of Americans over the age of 70 will skyrocket.

The media are full of stories about how this will put a strain on long-term healthcare costs and the possible demise of the Social Security program. But few, if any, of us seem to be thinking about a more basic question.

Prior to the creation of Social Security in 1935, not many people lived to become old. Those who did generally relied on their children (or grandchildren) to take them in and care for them. Now, because of Social Security, union pensions, and greater prosperity in general, older people became far more capable of taking care of themselves.

That's the good news. The bad news is that we have become a society that forgets about our elderly. As the baby boom "me generation" plans for its own long-lasting retirement, we tend to forget that our ability to plan ahead is due primarily to the society created by our now elderly parents. And as we focus on the problems that we think will only arise when the baby boomers retire, we fail to notice that we have abdicated our centuries-old role of caretaker for the previous generation.

Middle-aged adults, and those approaching middle age, whose elderly parents need more care for longer than any previous generation, are "too busy" to take care of them. We grew up with the indoctrination that all these retirement programs would free us from the responsibilities that all previous generations took on.

Granted, as people live longer, more and more families are faced with a situation of an elderly parent who needs to be cared for, and those elderly parents are needing that care for far longer than ever before. But is that a reason to ignore them?

We can only expect the kind of treatment when we are older that we provide for those who are older now. By turning our backs on the elderly, as the baby boom generation all too often does, we condemn ourselves, morally, to a later life of solitude, as our children practice the lessons they learned from us – and ignore us.

It isn't easy to care for an elderly parent. It never was, and despite modern technology and the services available in today's relatively wealthy society, it isn't getting easier. But it's our turn to step up, to prove ourselves worthy of all we have, to take care of those who made our lifestyle possible.

It's time to remember to respect our elders.