



## Editor's Notes

### WHERE ARE THE NEXT GENERATIONS OF HEALTH PROMOTION LEADERS AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HELP THEM GROW?

Most of my life, it seemed like I was the youngest person in the room. Selling health promotion programs to employers, writing textbooks, starting the *American Journal of Health Promotion*, serving on corporate and nonprofit boards...most of the people I worked with were 20 or more years older than me. I was very fortunate to be allowed to sit at the table. Much of my professional development was possible because many established people were very generous with their time when I reached out for help. They included Tom Ainsworth, Bob Allen, Lester Breslow, Denny Colacino, Dee Edington, Jonathan Fielding, Don Fraser, Jim Fries, Willis Goldbeck, Bill Hettler, Larry Green, Bob Karch, Gil Omenn, Dean Ornish, Jim Prochaska, Ken Pelletier, Don Vickery, Ken Warner, and many others.

Of course I was not alone. There was a whole cohort of young professionals working to establish themselves. They were my age, plus or minus a few years. They included David Anderson, Judd Allen, Bill Baun, Rick Bellingham, Larry Chapman, Lee Dukes, Barry Franklin, Ron Goetzel, Bob Gorsky, David Hunnicutt, Garry Lindsay, Joe Opatz, George Pfeiffer, Don Powell, Nico Pronk, Michael Samuelson, Seth Serxner, Neal Sofian, Mark Tager, Paul Terry, and others.\* My mental image of us is a bunch of guys running around the AAFDBI Conference in running shorts and T-shirts...quite buff and brash. I still hold that self-image most of the time. When I walk through a throng of students on a college campus, I don't see kids, I see myself...until I think about it, or until I see my reflection in a window. Then I remember that my daughters are older than these college students. Oh well.

Now, when I look around the room, I usually don't see those mentors who helped me along. Most of them are alive (some are close to my age), and most are fully engaged in exciting opportunities, but many are retiring. They have begun to pass the torch for leading the field to my peer group. We are still brash, but few of us are buff; most of us are grey, and some of us are losing our hair. Oh well. The wonderful part of this is that we have known each other for years, often for 20 to 30 years. We know the skills each of us can provide and we trust each other.

Thirty years have passed and I am no longer the youngest person in the room. The problem is I am not much older than the youngest person in the room. Where are all the young leaders, brash and buff? Where are all those young people challenging us for supremacy? I don't see them. Why are they not around? Who will take our place when we move on?

We seem to have a dearth of emerging health promotion leaders. I see it in the companies of my friends who are trying to grow their health promotion businesses. When they try to hire mid level managers with 10 to 15 years of work experience, they find very few candidates. I see it when I build the program for our Art and Science of Health Promotion Conference. There are few established and talented speakers under 45

years old. Fortunately, I do not see it in academic publishing. We receive a steady flow of high quality research from a growing pool of young scientists. I polled a few dozen of my colleagues about this issue and most (but not all) of them agreed there is a dearth of young leaders. The cause is partly demographics and partly economics. In 1980, the largest population cohort was people 20–24 years of age and the second largest was those 25–29. The size of the cohorts decreased almost every year for 20 years, at which time the cohorts started to be slightly larger than the previous cohort. However, those younger cohorts were never as large at the 20–29 cohort. In fact, 30 years later, the 50–54 cohort is still the second largest cohort in our population,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that many have started to die off. This is a trend that had never before been seen in the history of the United States. Previously, more and more people were born each year, so there were a lot more younger people than older people. The situation was compounded by economics. When the field took a down turn in the 1990s, job openings dried up and salary increases stalled. People with families had to move into other fields to earn a living wage.

What are the consequences? Health promotion vendors will have a hard time growing their companies...just at the time the field is poised to grow rapidly. Employers will not have capable people to run their programs. If programs do not produce positive outcomes, the field of health promotion will not endure, and the health of the people of our nation will suffer. That is the short summary.

What is the solution? Do we need to offer emerging leaders more leadership opportunities? Do we need some type of new society to nurture young leaders? Do we need to be better mentors? Maybe, maybe and yes. We also need more discussion on this issue. This was a discussion item in the plenary session and informal discussion groups at the 2009 Art and Science of Health Promotion Conference. I encourage conference organizers to add it to their programs. We have also set up a web discussion site to facilitate broader discussion. Please tell me if you agree that there is a dearth of young leaders — help us understand the consequences of this dearth and share your ideas on solutions. I look forward to hearing from you. To share your thoughts, go to this Web site <http://www.healthpromotionjournal.com/emergingleaders>.

*Michael O'Donnell*

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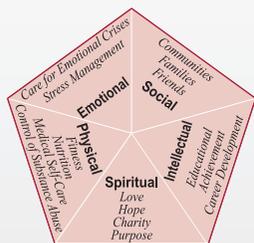
#### Reference

1. US Census Bureau, Population Pyramids, United States, Dynamic, <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbpys.pl?cty=US&out=d&ymax=250&submit=Submit>. Accessed April 5, 2009.

\* It does occur to me that my list of peers and mentors does not include ANY women, even though more than half the professionals in our field are women. Is that a function of how I see the world, or is there is a dearth of women in leadership roles in our field? This question is too important to address only as an after thought...I will raise it again in a future editorial.

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(O'Donnell, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 1989, 3(3):5.)

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