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Friendship Knows No Age

When Marisa Varalli, 44, unexpectedly found herself living alone in Hawaii during the pandemic spring of 2020, she was eager to make new friends. So, when she saw a man walking by as she stood on her balcony one morning, she called out, “Good morning,” and was delighted when he said “Good morning” back.

“It turned out he was my upstairs neighbor. Pretty soon, we got together to share food, and I met his wife and their best friends,” says Varalli. Before long, the group was boating, snorkeling, and enjoying other adventures together.

The fact that her neighbor was 83, and that his wife and their friends were in their 60s, wasn’t a problem—it was a bonus, Varalli says.

“I have plenty of really close friendships with folks who are in their 60s, 70s, and 80s,” says Varalli, a high school Spanish teacher living in Honolulu while on sabbatical from her job in San Francisco. Friends of varying ages, she says, share perspectives and stories that broaden her horizons and make life more fun.

Varalli and others who seek out intergenerational friendships are on to something, say social scientists, mental health advocates, and others working to break down artificial age divides.

Finding Common Ground

A dozen years ago, the word intergenerational was unknown to most people, says Elly Katz, of Los Angeles. Back then, Katz, now 70, was a graphic designer working in Boston and itching to do something new and meaningful. She had a vague idea that she wanted to combat ageism.

Her epiphany came one day when she was driving her 16-year-old son to school: What if, she thought, she could get teens to share their phenomenal energy with older adults?

The result was a matching program called Sages & Seekers, which Katz started with one private school in Boston and later expanded to Los Angeles. The program now includes college students, as well as high schoolers, paired with adults aged 60 and above. And because the pandemic forced it to go online, participants now come from all over.

The program brings small groups of younger and older people together for brief gab sessions and then allows self-selected pairs to bond in longer sessions over several weeks. There are no mentors or mentees—the idea is to encourage friendship and understanding among equals, Katz says.

Older people often come to the program believing that “kids are disrespectful and not interested in doing anything off their phones,” Katz says. Teens and young adults often expect to have nothing in common with elders, she says, but both groups are regularly proven to be wrong.

That was the case for Nita Bryant-Azmar, 76, of Los Angeles, and Mrudula Akkinespally, 19, a pre-med student at UCLA who lives in San Diego. Bryant-Azmar, a retired nurse and administrator, says that after some negative experiences in the workplace and elsewhere, “I had decided that people under age 30 were not my cup of tea.” Akkinespally says she thought people over age 40 were lazy and boring.

But over the course of their online chats this winter, Akkinespally learned that Bryant-Azmar had celebrated her last birthday with a 76-mile bike ride, liked some of the same TV shows she did, and had once struggled with college chemistry, just as she did. Bryant-Azmar learned that Akkinespally was thoughtfully planning a 25th anniversary party for her parents and was a sympathetic listener when Bryant-Azmar talked about missing her late husband. Bryant-Azmar, who has participated in the program four times now, says she’s learned that “there are some young people out there who are just wonderful.”

Akkinespally says she’s found a new role model in Bryant-Azmar, who skis, hikes, and travels widely. “When she told me how active she was, my mind was totally blown,” the younger woman says. “She has inspired me to take my health more seriously because I want to be as active as Nita is when I’m her age.”

Michelle Cavelier, 18, an American of Colombian descent, who just finished her last two years of high school in Bogota, and Clif de Cordoba, 76, a retired educator from Los Angeles, who has Puerto Rican roots, say they also formed a true connection in their video chats. They chose to speak entirely in Spanish and spent a lot of time discussing struggles with their cultural identities, the two say.

“I never expected in my wildest dreams that I would connect with someone that young about these things I’d been going through these umpteen years,” de Cordoba says.

Cavelier says: “It doesn’t matter the age; you can connect with anyone, as long as you are able to open your heart.”

Expanding Your Friend Zone

Most of us, of course, don’t meet our friends through a formal matching program. When we are young, we meet friends at school and through activities. Later, we make friends at work, in our neighborhoods, and through our various roles: Parents meet parents, retirees meet retirees, worshippers meet other worshippers, and golfers meet other golfers.

Often, those paths lead us to form friendships almost exclusively with people of our own approximate age, says social scientist Kasley Killam, founder of Social Health Labs, San Francisco. “People don’t

even think to diversify the ages of their friends.”

Irene Levine, a psychologist and journalist who writes The Friendship Blog (thefriendshipblog.com), agrees: “Unfortunately, there is a natural tendency to seek out friends who look, act, and talk like us. Being open to intergenerational friendships and other differences expands the potential pool.”

Thinking outside the age box comes naturally to some but takes more effort for others.

“There are so many wonderful opportunities if we just think about them,” says Colby Takeda, a senior manager with Blue Zones Project by Sharecare, an organization that promotes healthy communities.

Takeda, based in Honolulu, says any outing in your neighborhood is an opportunity to seek out new faces of various ages—not just the other stroller pushers, power walkers, or whoever looks the most like you. “When you are in the community garden and see the lady in the plot next to you, just say, ‘Hello,’” he suggests.

Likewise, when you are looking for groups to join and activities to pursue, consider whether they might attract people of various ages. And, Takeda says, don’t dismiss a group you think is only for older or younger people.

Varalli had that kind of open mind when, during her first months in Hawaii, she joined a bicycling group called the Red Hot Ladies Cycling Club. Originally formed for women over age 50, it now includes women and men with an age range of 27 to 78, says co-founder Patricia Johnson.



A LOOK AT INTERGENERATIONAL FRIENDSHIPS

Did you know that nearly one in four U.S. adults has a close friendship with someone who is 15 years younger or older than they are? Read on for more findings about friends of varied ages, according to AARP.

They most often met at work (26 percent), as neighbors (12 percent), at a place of worship (11 percent), or through mutual friends (10 percent).

Friendships between various ages are reported by similar numbers of men (38 percent) and women (36 percent).

Gen xers (now ages 41 to 56) are most likely, at 41 percent, to have friends from other age groups, closely followed by boomers (now ages 57 to 75) at 39 percent. Nearly a third, 32 percent, of millennials (now 25 to 40) have such friendships.

Intergenerational friends do and discuss the same sorts of things together that other friends do—going to the movies (39 percent), dining (26 percent), and talking about hobbies and interests (27 percent), as well as their pasts, their families, and their work (all 21 percent).

The most common benefit cited by those with intergenerational friends: They help me see another perspective. Many see older friends as role models, or say younger friends keep them up on trends and boost their energy.

Johnson, who happens to be the oldest member, says she started cycling herself in her early 60s, to connect with young tech workers when she was a personal development consultant in California. “The young people were not using golf as a way to connect,” she says.

She now helps lead weekly rides in which participants, regardless of age, can break into self-selected groups that ride at various speeds and challenge levels. The slower groups “are not necessarily older,”

she says—something that helps break age stereotypes and makes the rides more fun and interesting. She and Varalli often ride in the same easy-going group.

“Cycling definitely is a place where age doesn’t make much of a difference,” Johnson says.

Riding with younger people has helped keep her connected with the broader world, Johnson says. For example, during the early months of the pandemic, members who were healthcare workers talked about the stresses of their jobs; other working adults in the group shared their financial worries. Those are perspectives a group composed entirely of retirees would have missed, Johnson says.

Varalli says she is convinced that having friends across the age spectrum just makes life richer.

“When we segregate by age, we tend to start segregating in other ways,” she says, “and putting ourselves in very small boxes.”

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