

The time is now for a national discussion on aging

On Monday, I had the pleasure once again of attending the annual community celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King at Lake Michigan College. This year's theme, "The Urgency of Now," rang true for me on a number of fronts.

"All men are interdependent" is a King quote emphasizing how food, clothes and tools of our daily lives are actually products created by many people and countries. He states, "Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally 'in the red' ... Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half the world."

Much of the celebration at LMC focused on the need to recognize value in every

individual and the importance of supporting each other through all phases of life. The speakers and vocalists inspired the audience not to be swayed by fear or preconceived notions, not to be complacent, but to recognize the interconnection of people. If we recognize interdependence, then we can be aware and look for ways to personally help one another. It was good.

We were reminded that everyone's story is unique. The program's message expanded from African-American struggles and



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history, to all people. We're all on our personal journeys. All of us face challenges. All of us need each other.

A parallel with age became apparent. We tend to focus talks on brotherhood or sisterhood on issues like race, or culture, or religion or socio-economic variance; not so much on age. Yet persons of advanced age often become victims of fear or preconceived notions. People tell me they feel strangely invisible or less connected with people if their pace is slower or age requires them to be assisted in a daily task. They feel judged.

None of us knows what our future self will be like. Helen Keller said, "To keep our faces toward

change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable." She became the personification of strength.

Our elder population embodies unrecognized strength, often at a time when subtle prejudices mount against them.

Bruce Chernof, president and CEO of SCAN Foundation in Long Beach, Calif., says it's time for us all to re-imagine how we want to live in our older age. We should stop talking about a "silver tsunami" that implies the aging of our population is a problem to be solved. The focus instead should be simply how we want to live.

Chernof recently chaired a congressional commis-

sion on long-term care that discussed how to create a positive environment for an older population. He sees three ways that people can work toward a more supportive environment.

First, in response to a movement toward "person-centeredness," he feels "we must dissolve the silos between health systems and community-based service organizations, as both provide critical, interconnected support to older Americans and their family caregivers."

Second, he feels "we must consider a person's functioning first when planning and executing care delivery, breaking away from single disease-based care models ..."

Third, he feels that we

need to find new incentives to steer us toward change. Examples could be measures of quality or financial incentives that focus on the effect on the person rather than completing a set procedure.

The "Urgency of Now" applies to so many things that need changing. Dr. King warns against the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism." Time goes so fast. The time is now for a national dialogue on what it means to be fortunate enough to age and how we want to live.

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