

Boomers: Whimpers Or Bangs?



PBS

By FELICIA R. LEE

On Jan. 1, 2046, the hardiest members of that noisy, 78-million member club known as the Baby Boomers will be celebrating their 100th birthdays.

The very oldest boomers began turning 60 last year, and "The Boomer Century: 1946-2046," a documentary to be broadcast tomorrow night on PBS, explores how life after 60 might look to the generation known for challenging authority and redefining everything from race relations to marriage.

Will the boomers quietly — and uncharacteristically — get off the stage and leave the messy questions about the environment and the social safety network to the youngsters? Or as science extends life, will they lead the charge in reshaping notions of age in the 21st century? Just imagine: TV shows like "Grandmother Knows Best," third and fourth careers, old-age communes with families of choice. But if millions of people routinely live to be 100, what about challenges as varied as social security and failing health for the largest elderly population in American history?

The two-hour "Century" asks those questions and poses those questions to a raft of experts and commentators in health, academe, politics and the arts: a crowd that includes Tony Snow, Erica Jong, Julian Bond, J. Craig Venter, Oliver Stone and Alvin Toffler, among others. They talk about their own experiences and offer predictions, along with the familiar film footage of Vietnam, Woodstock and civil rights protests.

"Boomers who turn 60 this year have an actuarial life expectancy of

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82.5 years," says Ken Dychtwald, a gerontologist and psychologist who conceived the film and acts as host, narrator and executive producer.

"What I actually think is going to happen is that in the near future, there are going to be mind-boggling breakthroughs that will make living to 90, or even 100 commonplace," says Dr. Dychtwald, the author of numerous books on aging and the founder of Age Wave, a consulting firm. "Because of the longevity revolution, the whole landscape and mindscape of adulthood is about to be dramatically altered," he says in the film.

"I think we're going to see new forms and new kinds of families in later lives," Daniel Goleman, the psychologist who wrote the book "Emotional Intelligence," predicts in "Century." Eve Ensler, the playwright famous for "The Vagina Monologues," says her fantasy of being older is "living with a whole group of women, you know, in some wonderful way and with a couple of great men."

But "Century" starts at the beginning, defining the boomers. From 1946 until 1964, 92 percent of all women who could have children did, Dr. Dychtwald says, producing a birthrate of a baby roughly every eight seconds for 18 straight years. That's an average of more than 4 million a year, with 2 million baby-boom age immigrants joining the 76 million native boomers.

While that means plenty of company for those turning 50 and dealing with both existential and real aches, being a baby boomer is defined as much by sensibilities as demographics, says Dr. Dychtwald, who himself turns 57 today. Using the conceit of a "great American baby-boom exhibition hall," where he is the curator taking visitors on a journey through the boomer century, he explores how baby boomers became a culturally cohesive group by sharing formative experiences, transmitted by the magic of television, music and books.

"I grew up in Newark, New Jersey," Dr. Dychtwald says in the film, "but if I got off a plane in Oklahoma and turned to somebody who was within five years of me and I said, 'M-I-C, they would go, K-E-Y ... M-O-U-S-E.'"



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Photofest

Above, Marines near Da Nang, Vietnam, in 1965. Far left, in Selma, Ala., a demonstration against Sheriff Jim Clark in 1965. Near left, "The Mickey Mouse Club," with Annette Funicello, second from left.

A group is defined by both demographics and sensibilities.

Mr. Snow, the White House press secretary, who was born in 1957, recalls growing up in a neighborhood where people came over to borrow that proverbial cup of sugar. "There were fewer than half as many people in the United States as there are today," Mr. Snow says of his childhood years. "It was a much smaller country, and therefore I think it was at least easier to maintain that kind of small sense of community."

Let anyone get too nostalgic for that mom in pearls and apron, sugar bowl in hand, Mr. Bond, the chairman of the N.A.A.C.P., reminds viewers that the discrimination of the '50s and '60s meant it was not a great time to be black. "Television created a kind of aspiration of what could be," Mr. Bond says. "So this medium did an enormous job in both creating aspiration and demonstrating how far you were from that aspiration."

Ms. Jong, whose books, like "Fear of Flying," documented the sexual revolution and the feminist movement, observes, "You have to see the boomer generation in opposition to the Depression generation, or you really can't understand it at all." She continues, "Lot of confidence, a lot of beans, a lot of 'I can do it — anything.' That's the boomer generation."

Ms. Jong, who turned 65 yesterday, adds that one of the gifts of the baby-boomer feminists was to men. "We made it mainstream for men to parent," she says.

"The Boomer Century" is a film that Dr. Dychtwald said he imagined for a long time, despite no shortage of earlier examinations of boomers, from the books they read to their political impact. His ambition, he said in an interview, was to pull it all together and to look ahead. "How did we get to be the way we are internally?" he said. "I wanted to go beyond looking at boomers from the outside."

Dr. Dychtwald says in "Century" that he has identified four common boomer traits: idealism, anti-authoritarianism, embracing change and self-empowerment.

Fernando Torres-Gil, the director of the Center for Policy Research on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles, is among those in "Century" looking at the potential dark side of a huge older population.

Besides health concerns, neither Social Security nor Medicare were designed to match the number or longevity of the boomers, experts on aging in the film note, and many boomers have not saved enough money at a time when problems with pensions, social security and the like are increasingly evident. Will baby boomers use their electoral clout to provide leadership, they ask, or will they demand that government bail them out? Or will they stand on the sidelines?"

It depends on who you ask. "The Boomer Century" is meant to provoke discussions about the many questions confronting his generation, Dr. Dychtwald said.

"Three assassinations and a war created a generation never really satisfied with the status quo," he said, referring to the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Vietnam. "I think we'll bring some of those sensibilities to maturity. Or as Daniel Goleman, the psychologist, said, 'It's not how you enter the stage, but how you exit that people remember.' I don't think we've thought enough about who we'll become."