Welcome to Age Boom Academy

Shocking stats, busted myths, and an eye-opening trip to a nursing home:

A journalist reports on a Public Health–Journalism School program on aging

BY BECKY RYNOR
"Aging sucks," my 56-year-old sister flatly stated when I told her I was heading to New York City last spring to attend the Age Boom Academy at Columbia University. The Academy—a workshop and fellowship to promote better-informed reporting and encourage broader media coverage of aging-related issues—was not her idea of a good time in the Big Apple. This from a healthy, active, and attractive grandmother who travels, scuba dives, gardens, and works full time but longs for retirement so she can travel, scuba dive, and garden even more. If she is one of the pictures of aging in 2012, then exactly what sucks?

In fact, questioning such blanket assumptions about the horrors of aging and what it means to be an aging society was very much the point of the five-day seminar, which was led jointly by Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism and the Mailman School of Public Health. For the 21 of us journalists, editors, bloggers, and researchers in attendance, spending a week grasping just how unprepared the country is for the coming demographic shift was "an OMG moment," as one participant put it. Here’s a taste of some of the demographic facts and figures rolled out for our contemplation:

- In the U.S., 10,000 baby boomers are turning 65 every day.
- By 2030, one in eight people around the world will be 65 or older.
- Throughout human history, children have outnumbered older people. That will change by about 2018, when people age 65 and over will outnumber children under 5.
- People are already living about 30 years longer than we did 100 years ago.

Age Boom fellows were still tucking into dessert at a working lunch on the first day when Mailman School Dean Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH, began challenging stereotypes, busting myths, and questioning how we frame our views on aging. One such view: The growth of the elderly population is a burden that society cannot afford. "Is that true?" Dean Fried queried. "How does that assumption drive policy?" And how does it contribute to tensions between generations?

"We are at best ambivalent about whether this is a good thing," she said in reference to more of us living longer. At worst, society harbors "profound ageism. We avert our gaze."

“We have to stop treating aging like it’s a disaster,” observed the after-lunch lecturer, Stephen McConnell, who is the U.S. country director at the Atlantic Philanthropies. "If we think it's a disaster, we will react one way. If we think it has potential, we will react another way."

Potential in aging? Well, consider these lesser-known facts on the positive side of the aging coin:

- People 50 and older are less likely to suffer depression, mental illness, and substance abuse than people in their 20s.
- The poverty rate in the U.S. is higher among youth than among seniors.
- People now in their 50s are more likely to continue working into their 70s and 80s—at least part time—because they want to. McConnell cited a finding that 84 percent of seniors with an “encore career” said it gave them “tremendous satisfaction.”
- The crime rate is likely to drop as the population ages. As gerontologist Karl Pillemer pointed out, “there aren’t a whole lot of 55-year-old gang members.”

For journalists, it’s easy to stray into extremes when writing about aging. Stories tend toward doom and gloom or patronizing boosterism: depicting ailing seniors who will suck our social-services coffers dry or the plucky 80-year-old who is still running the Boston Marathon.

The Age Boom Academy was created in 2000 by famed geriatrician, psychiatrist, and activist Robert N. Butler, MD, and the New York Times Company Foundation. The Academy was an annual event at the International Longevity Center, a think tank founded by Butler that is now based at the Mailman School. Butler was
COLUMBIA PUBLIC HEALTH was a veritable fountain of story ideas. Becky Rynor, a journalist based in Ottawa, Ontario, is a journalist based in Ottawa, Ontario.

If Age Boom hadn’t opened my eyes, I wouldn’t have thought to talk to these elderly women and capture their stories. I don’t think I would have seen the need to write about the plight of the elderly. I was inspired to write about the need for new terminology.”

EINGOLD was a veritable fountain of story ideas. He challenged us to investigate why society allows the elderly to be “overmedicated” and why “elder abuse is an epidemic in this country,” and to expose why it is costing the Hebrew Home—and similar facilities—$300,000 per year “to flush drugs down the toilet.” He says industry-supported Medicare legislation makes it impossible to repurpose perfectly good, sealed medications that have not been used by the patient. “Why couldn’t those blister packs be used for elderly people who have to make a choice between food and medicine?” he asks.

Associated Press correspondent Matt Sedensky says the Academy was a good reminder that the aging beat provides rich fodder for stories. One of the few reporters assigned full-time to this beat, he is strategically based in Florida, home to 2.8 million people age 65 or older and the highest percentage of older adults of any state in the union.

“I’m privileged to be covering this,” says Sedensky. “It’s a subject that’s incredibly compelling no matter what facet you look into. If you look at nursing homes, it’s about freedom versus what many see as imprisonment. If you look at Social Security and Medicare, it’s not only a vitriolic political fight, it’s really the actual survival of real people. So in every facet of this very broad beat, there’s a compelling story.”

Ann Neumann, editor of the online journal The Revealer, a publication of the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, agrees: “This is a hugely important area of research and study. I think it will affect our social, economic, and political policies for years to come.”

Gary Rotstein, a reporter and editor at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette for the past 22 years, called the Academy “a kick in the pants if one is feeling stale. It plants some new seeds.” This was his second time attending the Academy.

Sure enough, by week’s end, bylines were flying. “Age Is Only a Number; We Need a Name,” was the title of an online piece by Rebecca Nappi, feature writer for the Spokane, Wash. She challenged readers to come up with a new name, something other than “senior citizens,” to identify this burgeoning demographic.

In the first four months after Age Boom, participants published more than 30 articles and blog posts on aging-related topics, and formed a Google Group that has fostered a rich discussion of story ideas and reflections on what they learned.

For me, the Age Boom Academy continues to fuel numerous articles and conversations with colleagues, friends, and, yes, my sister, the would-be retiree. This spring, I traveled to the Sahel region of Africa to observe the effects of the third drought there in a decade. One of the stories I lit on is how the drought, crop failures, and food shortages are impacting the elderly, who are finding themselves taking on more work and more responsibility for extended family even though they may be down to one meal or less per day themselves. I don’t think I would have thought to talk to these elderly women and capture their stories if Age Boom hadn’t opened my eyes.

BECKY RYNOR is a journalist based in Ottawa, Ontario.