A STATE OF MIND

Age-defying population is growing strong in Western New York as 'middle age' moves up a decade or two

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That ski patrol volunteer schussing to your rescue at HoliMont in Ellicottville has 42 years of ski patrol experience under his belt.

It would be longer, but he started late.

Ed Ziegenfuss, 74, didn't start skiing until he was 30, the same year he took up sailboat racing. But he's still patrolling the hills at HoliMont once a week, and in the summer, can be spotted sailing his 32-foot boat, "Hot Ziggety."

Meanwhile, at 64, Buffalo's Queen of Soul, Barbara St. Clair, is still wowing audiences with her passionate, powerful soul, Motown and pop vocals after 50 years in the business.

And we all know what 80-year-old Marv Levy is doing these days.

All over Western New York, vital, active people 50 and older - sometimes much older - are filling their busy lives with physical and mental challenges. It's clear that "middle age," which used to be characterized as somewhere around 40, has changed. Is it 50? 60? 65? It depends to whom you talk.

A national Census report released last week found that in 2030, almost one out of five Americans - 72 million people - will be 65 or older.

A county report found that in Western New York, the numbers will be lower, probably reduced by trends that see people retiring to warmer climates or hotter economies where their children have relocated. The county report, called "Project 2015," found that in nine years, 16 percent of the local population will be over age 65, and by 2030, 21 percent will be over that age.

But the stereotype of older folks settling into a rocking chair on the porch or in front of the television has long since lost validity.

"A friend of mine once said, 'Once you retire, you've got to have a reason to get up in the morning.' You've got to like what you're doing. I know people my age who are still very active in their profession, because that's what they love, so that's what they should do."

Ed Ziegenfuss
A "bonus lifespan"

Dr. Robert S. Stall, a local gerontologist, internist and assistant professor at the UB School of Medicine, says over the past 20 years he’s seen increasingly older people in his office.

Stall, who finished medical school in 1983, says, "During my training, people 70 and up were appropriate for me, and now I’m finding that to utilize my specialty, which is the frailer elderly, I’m really looking at people who are 80 and up.

"I’m turning away people in their 70s who are active, independent and use few medications."

For example, Stall says, "My parents are in their 70s, and I do not think of them as elderly people. They just went to Australia and New Zealand for their 50th anniversary and loved it. They live in Florida, they drive up here a couple times a year, visit me and my family, my brothers and their families, visit friends - and they're not unusual, either."

Contrast that with the memory Steven Slon, editor of AARP’s magazine, has of his father:

"My dad had been an athletic young man, but by his 50s he was rather overweight and the idea of jogging or bicycling or playing sports - there's just a disconnect there. He would throw the ball around with me a bit, but running or really playing ball with me, no. As it turned out, he lived into his 80s, but nobody expected that. It's a bonus lifespan."

The idea of a "bonus lifespan" - extra years after traditional retirement age that can be filled with challenges and contributions - fascinates Slon.

"In the magazine, we encourage people to exploit that bonus lifespan, to say, "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" he says. "This is a chance to realize opportunities we never could have realized if we expected to only live to be 60."

Living longer

The ultimate stereotype-shatterer is Levy, who was hired in January as the Bills’ general manager at age 80. At the time, Levy quipped, "I'm old enough to know my limitations and I'm young enough to exceed them."

Strangely enough, Levy also confessed to shading his age - 20 years ago. He said, "Way back when I was hired in 1986, I was 61 years of age, and it sounded too old so I lied and said I was 58. Finally, I cleared that up. Maybe as I matured I came to realize it wasn't a factor. It's what you can do that counts."

Ziegenfuss, who divides his time between Williamsville and Ellicottville, is living proof of that.
Ziegenfuss, the oldest member of the HoliMont Ski area volunteer ski patrol, says although "some days I feel my age," he generally feels 20 to 25 years younger than he is.

Ziegenfuss has done enough to fill multiple lifetimes. He retired in 1998 after owning a wholesale distribution company for 31 years, then leading a small chamber of commerce, both in Maryland.

In 1999, after the death of his wife, Ziegenfuss married her longtime friend, Sara "Suzie" Palmer Leiser, whose husband had died in 1998. "We both consider ourselves extremely lucky," he said.

Today, Ziegenfuss and Leiser play golf and sail. Ziegenfuss has belonged to the barbershop chorus Friends of Harmony since 1993 and got his private pilot's license in 2002, when he was 69. He and Leiser take long trips, either overseas or by RV through the United States, at least yearly.

Ziegenfuss says annual medical checkups - and knowing that he'd have to answer to his doctor the next year - and the counsel of a financial expert - have improved his quality of life.

But the key, he says, is "You've got to keep busy. A friend of mine once said, "Once you retire, you've got to have a reason to get up in the morning.' You've got to like what you're doing. I know people my age who are still very active in their profession, because that's what they love, so that's what they should do."

Music and more

Barbara St. Clair is doing exactly what she should be doing. The Alabama native moved to Buffalo at age 3 and started singing professionally just 10 years later. That was 51 years ago.

She still performs often around Western New York.

"I always tell people, you see entertainers who are 80 or 90 and still working, well, that's how I want to be. They do it because it's something they love to do."

In fact, St. Clair has difficulty estimating how old she feels. "I never thought about it," she says. "I think as long as you're healthy and able to do whatever you love, I don't think age has anything to do with it."

Another woman whose long life has been interwoven with music is Jean Hamlin of Williamsville, who will be 86 in April. She was a vocal coach and accompanist in the music department at the University at Buffalo for 25 years, and was organist at the Amherst Community Church in Snyder, where her husband, Cyrus Hamlin, was music director for 36 years. Cyrus Hamlin died in 1999.

As impressive as those years of dedication are, they don't overshadow what Hamlin is doing now. Besides her annual vacations with her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, she works out at Curves at least four times a week, reads, attends concerts, plays piano and volunteers in the chemotherapy clinic at Roswell Park Memorial Institute weekly.

"I feel about 60," she says. "I think your attitude is of vital importance - you have to think positively and enjoy each day, and not worry about what's coming or bemoan what has happened in the past. Let the past go and think forward."

A fellow Roswell volunteer, Rosemary Marlette of Buffalo, is 83 but has the schedule of a person half her age. Besides her weekly shift in the hospitality room at the hospital, she says, "I play bridge a lot, I play tennis, I play golf and I swim. I walk two miles every day in 35 minutes. My friends and I kid that we play bridge for the brain, and golf and tennis for the body. It's a matter of keeping a balance."

Marlette says, "I really think it's more your attitude than medical advances or anything else that's come along the line to help us. Naturally, there are new medications, but in the overall picture, it's your attitude."
Starting young

Beth Vanderbrook of the Town of Tonawanda is a relative youngster, but is already working on her long-term fitness. She laughs when she's asked how old she is. "I'm 51, but I lie so much that it took me a minute. I always tell everyone I'm 29. My son is going to be 24, and he says, "Mom, I'm going to lap you!""

The mother of three finds it hard to put an age on how old she feels - "I definitely don't feel 51, but . . . like I'm in my 20s."

A registered nurse who works full time at the Buffalo Veterans Hospital, Vanderbrook started riding her bicycle to and from work about 12 years ago because of a lack of parking. "Then it became a health thing," she says. "It just feels great to ride my bike to work," which she does from early spring to late autumn.

When she decided she needed more exercise, she considered joining a gym, until her sister pointed out, "You know, you work in a place that has 11 stories. Why don't you just climb the stairs?"

Vanderbrook started off climbing a flight, then taking the elevator the rest of the way to her eighth-floor job. She added a second flight, then a third. Now, after her shift ends, she goes to the basement, then climbs to the 11th floor - six times. "It takes me about 25 minutes," she says. "I even have my little stopwatch to time myself. I usually run from the basement to the third floor, but then I walk the rest."

The results have pleased Vanderbrook. "I feel so much better. I have a lot more energy," she says. In four years, with her combination of bicycling, stair-climbing and running at a local park, she's lost 30 pounds. "My doctors are very happy," she says.

Vanderbrook knows today's youngsters, especially girls, have an advantage she didn't. "When I was growing up, there weren't many girls sports teams - girls were to be the cheerleaders, and even cheerleading wasn't as rigorous as it is now," she says. "That bothers me, that we weren't taught to pick a sport to keep ourselves fit for life. And now I think the kids are. My three kids are all runners. It's good to have something you can always do."

Always is a long time. But as AARP magazine editor Slon says, "We have a chance to rethink what it means to be 50, what it means to be 60, and so on."

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