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Levy scores one for older folks

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If the folks who produce posters have any sense, it won't be long before a shot of a tanned and shirtless Marv Levy hits the shelves. There would be a pinup in the lobby of every senior housing complex in America.

The 80-year-old Marv's hiring as Bills' general manager sends a huge societal message: It ain't over, just because you're older. You don't have to explain it to anybody at the Cheektowaga Senior Center.

"Many older folks are more capable than young people," said Betty Skoney, 73, pausing from a game of mahjong. "We're more experienced. We're more conscientious." She chuckled, loaded and fired: "Hey, we're not dead yet."

Levy's ascendency is the biggest boost for Gray Power since senior citizen Strom Thurmond married a 24-year-old beauty queen. Life may not begin at 80 -- but it doesn't have to end then, either.

Sunset can be the most beautiful time of day. Tony Bennett won a Grammy at 77. Ronald Reagan was president at 78. Segovia played fabulously into his 80s. An 80-something Michelangelo sculpted his second Pieta. Thurmond served in the U.S. Senate at 100.

Just because you're beyond 75 doesn't mean you're ready for the scrap heap. Bills owner Ralph Wilson cracks Prozac jokes at 87. Levy is 80, looks 70 and his IQ is probably twice that number.

It shows what can happen if you've got good genes, eat right and take care of yourself.

"I see so many young people," said Dr. Robert Stall, geriatrician and assistant professor of medicine at UB, "who are inside of older bodies."

Levy is one of them. He lifts weights and runs five miles three times a week. If he succeeds -- and frankly, the Bills can't get much worse -- stereotypes will shatter.

"He is in a position to change how people think about older people," Stall said. "Ask people what 80 means, and a lot of them say crotchety folks who talk slow."

Obviously, no one turns back the clock. Levy isn't Dorian Gray. Age wears on the body and, sometimes, on the mind. Yet some folks carry the years easier than others. Folks like Richard Persson.

Taking a break from shooting pool at the Cheektowaga Senior Center, Persson admitted: "When I was 50, I thought when you reached 65 it was all over. Now I'm 76 and guess what -- it's still not over."

Sixty is the new 50, but nobody does more for 80 than the brainy, Churchill-quoting Levy. Maybe it's time our youth-obsessed society stopped deifying the Hillary Duffs and Nick Lacheys and started honoring the Marv Levys. Or at least adjusted the balance. My Dad is 90 and quotes Yeats. Mom is 84 and walks a mile on most days. Just because you're over 70 doesn't mean you're over the hill. I expect to see more empathy for older folks as the huge Boomer demographic hits 60.

"Certainly, you're more predisposed to certain illnesses as you get older," geriatrician Stall said. "But illness isn't a function of age. Anemia is traceable to diet. Depression can hit at any age."

Look no further than the NFL. St. Louis Rams Coach Mike Martz missed most of last season with a heart infection. Martz is 54.
Nobody knows how many good years Levy has left. For this job, he doesn't need many. It is the NFL, the land of the quick turnaround. Levy is the Bills' third GM in six years. He should have the time to get it done.

Whatever happens, it will happen because Levy is or isn't up to the job. Not because he is 80.

A lot of walls of prejudice came down over the past generation. African-Americans coach in the NFL. Women run multinational companies. Among the last frontiers of stereotype is age.

Levy carries the torch. I hope he finds a way.

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