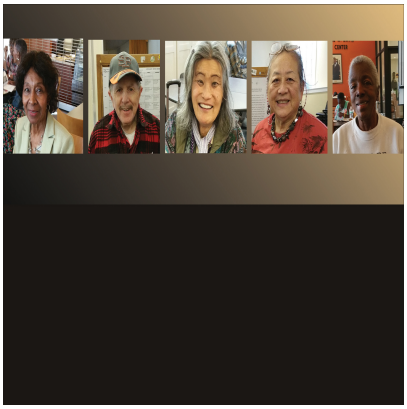


Seniors Say â?¦ senior? elder? old person? Whatâ??s in a name?

Description

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EDITORâ??S NOTE: In this series, we get the thoughts and reactions of people 50 and older to a variety of everyday issues. If you or anyone you know would be willing to field some questions, email maryhunt@sfseniorbeat.com or rebeccalum@sfseniorbeat.com.

Story and photographs by Mary Hunt and Rebecca Rosen Lum

Question: Youâ??re over 55 â?? old enough to qualify for many senior discounts, but also old enough to be aware that youâ??re being treated differently, sometimes in ways that arenâ??t comfortable. We asked several seniors what they prefer this stage of life be called â?? elderly? mature? â?? and which of these identifiers drives them up the wall. What *is* in a name?

The term â??golden yearsâ?• was coined as an advertising pitch for the Sun City development in the 1950s, although seniors today may be more likely to associate it with rock star David Bowie.

â??Why should I need to be called anything?â?• said Marilyn Chow, after her class at the San Francisco Ballet. â??Iâ??m a person. Iâ??ve always been a person, and Iâ??m *still* a person.

â??On reflection, growing older is about growing wiser,â?• said Chow, who declined to divulge her age. â??Itâ??s a continuing growth and learning opportunity every dayâ?¦an opportunity to integrate life lessons along the way and to share oneâ??s wisdom with the upcoming generations.â?•

Reframing aging

The notion that â??seniorâ?• has become a pejorative term is reflected in the trend to â??reframeâ?• aging. In the industries and agencies that serve this demographic, itâ??s the latest buzzword. Itâ??s generated a host of programs aimed at keeping older adults connected to their communities â?? and an effort to find perhaps peppier terminology for those of a certain age. One earnest group suggested â??perennial.â?•

Thesaurus.com offers up such synonyms as superannuated, gray, grizzled, venerable, hoary, not young, of long life, past oneâ??s prime, far advanced in years, matured, having lived long, full of years, seasoned, debilitated, infirm, inactive, and deficient.

No thanks, said the seniors we spoke to in various San Francisco neighborhoods.

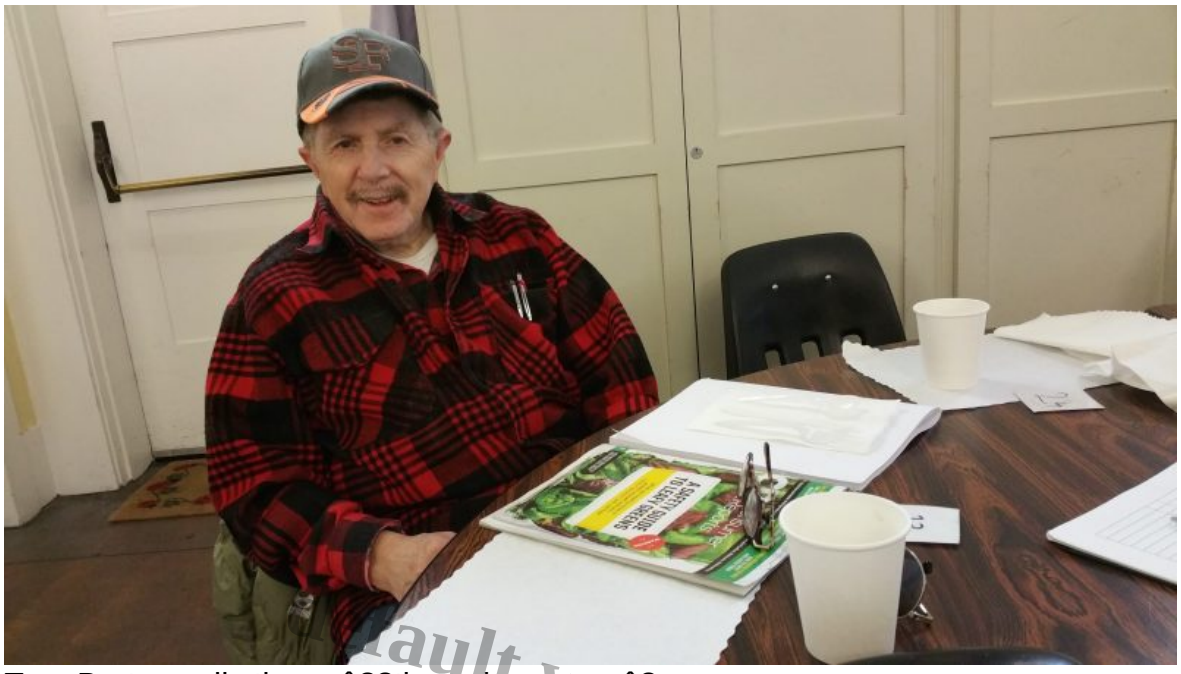


Nancy Wong likes the term â??elder.â?•

â??Elder is great because it implies wisdom,â?• said Nancy Wong, 69, a retired IRS professional interviewed at Castro Senior Center, where she joins friends for the Project Open Hand Lunch.

â??When people get older, they modify their lives in many ways,â?• she said. â??The word â??oldâ?? means you are limited in what you can do, you canâ??t do much,â?• she said. â??But elder, or senior, suggests wisdom and experience.â?•

Veteran photographer Tom Barton, 76, calls this stage of life â??the trying years,â?• because for him, this is a time for trying new things, engaging in new experiences â??just to make your life better.â?•



Tom Barton calls these â??the trying years.â?•

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Barton pushed for â?? and got â?? a pedestrian crossing light on Geary Boulevard at Stanyan Street after bringing a problem to the group Geary Rapid at SFMTA. â??I learned that one person can make a difference,â?• he said.

He plans outside activities for the Castro Senior center and edits its newsletter, â??so Iâ??m very busy,â?• he said. You name the technology, Bartonâ??s got it: iPad, iPhone, laptop â?? and ease with social media.

Age of â??reinterpretationâ??

For Jay KarvÃ©, 69, a friend of Bartonâ??s, this is â??the age of reinterpretation.

â??Everything gets re-evaluated, in terms of how I am now,â?• he said. â??People treat me differently because I am older. First, they see the age, and they may get no further than that.â?•

Karve immigrated to the U.S. from Mumbai, India, in 1975 to work as a computer engineer.

Call them what you will; just donâ??t patronize them, these seniors said. That includes asking â??how many years youngâ?• they are â?? too cutesy.



Jasmine Gee is â??70 years young.â?•

But then thereâ??s clarinetist Jasmine Gee, who sings in three choral groups. Late for a Project Open Hand lunch due to an appointment at the manicurist, she said, â??I donâ??t mind, because Iâ??m 70 years young.â?• She participates in three choral groups.

At 81, Betty Wilson hasnâ??t slowed down much. She still lives in the same Bayview District house she bought 50 years ago. An only child, she has six children, 20 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

â??I *am* a seniorâ??

â??I live a healthy life,â?• she said. â??I live every day to its fullest. Iâ??m still mobile. I drive my car every day. Get up when I want to. I *am* a senior. As far as Iâ??m concerned, thereâ??s a lot of wisdom attached to that name.â?•



Betty Wilson seizes the day.

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Wilson loves to beat out the blues in her steel drum workshop at the Bayview Senior Center and hits the dance floor a couple times a week.

People tell Classie Kendrick she doesnâ??t look her age. â??And I *definitely* donâ??t act my age.â?•



Classie Kendrick: ageless.

â??Golden yearsâ?• suits Kendrick just fine. So does senior. Twelve years ago, after a 30-year career with Wells Fargo, she took a job as activity director at the Bayview Senior Center.

â??I donâ??t mind being called a senior, but not an old person,â?• she said.

â??A lot of these ladies say these are their best years, even though their spouse is already gone,â?• she said. â??They do what they want to do. They donâ??t have to rush home and cook dinner for their husbands. Itâ??s not like youâ??re glad youâ??re husbandâ??s gone, but you â?? only have to worry about just one person, and thatâ??s you.

â??Your kids are grown and gone. If I cook, itâ??s a couple times a week and that lasts two or three days.â?•

â??Youâ??ll get thereâ??

One of her ventures brought young people in to the senior center to learn how to seek jobs, present themselves and prepare for interviews.

â??Sometimes youâ??d hear young people say, â??Oh, you all be down there with all them old folks?â?? They make it sound dirty. I say, â??You keep living, youâ??ll get there.â?•

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1. All Posts

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