

Desire to learn mah-jongg helped Stephanie Riger overcome her own biases toward seniors

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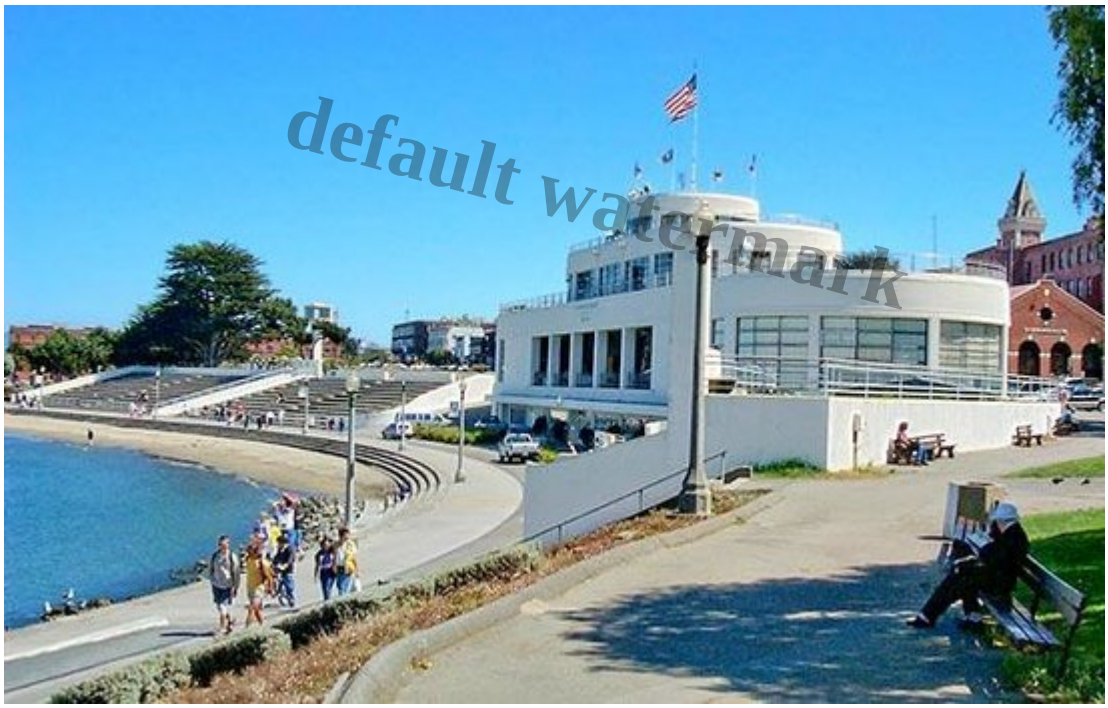
SENIOR BEAT GUEST COLUMN â?? Even though Iâ??m 78 years old, I have resisted seeing myself as a senior. Itâ??s not just age, itâ??s accepting the negative image I have of seniors. Even though Iâ??ve never experienced ageism myself, I nonetheless defined being a senior as being elderly, frail, sweet, and a little dotty. I am none of those things; well, maybe elderly. When I imagine a senior, I picture President Biden slowly shuffling across a stage or, worse, looking confused and bewildered as his sentences trail off into the ether. I saw my father lose dignity as his body betrayed him in numerous ways at 98 years old.


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Stephanie Riger, center, with fellow mah-jongg players who have become a friendship group.
(Photo by Jan Robbins)

The dictionary says a senior is a person of high rank, but our culture seems to believe the opposite. Seniors are seen as disposable, taking up space for younger people, useless and a burden.

A lot of changes in my life, including retirement, point to my being a senior. I walk to stay in shape, but I drag myself up the hill I sauntered up just a few years ago. Iâ??m too unsteady to change the lightbulbs in the ceiling fixture although I did that not long ago. My phone must be on speaker to hear clearly. I want to buy a new car just to get a backup camera for safety. I expect more such changes are in my future.



The San Francisco Maritime Museum houses the San Francisco Senior Center.

I wanted to learn how to play mah-jongg to join my friends in a game. A friend told me about a class at the senior center near my home on Russian Hill. Itâ??s housed at Aquatic Park in the Maritime Museum, a beautiful art deco building overlooking the bay. Sleek lines of chrome highlight its aerodynamic bright white exterior. The center is accessed through a door at one end of the building. I have walked by that door dozens of times, never thinking that I could belong inside.

Resisting an image

So I resisted. Having never been in a senior center before, I imagined the place as something similar to a mental hospital, like the ones where I volunteered while in college. There, troubled, frail people huddled against the wall in their nighties, often toothless. I resisted entering a space that might even vaguely resemble that.

My desire to learn mah-jongg is what overcame my resistance. I talked my friend Camille into joining me, and with some trepidation, we walked through the door. On the way to the class, we passed a ceramics studio where people were hard at work creating vases, plates, and more. I was charmed by ceramic replicas of cupcakes and Big Macs.

Two dozen people in an exercise class were actively squatting and lunging and looking fit. Still others were playing furious games of ping pong. In a large room near the entrance, a few people played chess while others ate lunch. Brochures advertised classes in yoga, photography, and computers.

Two women in addition to Camille and me showed up for the mah-jongg class. They were much like my current friends, with a few creaks in their joints but lively and eager to learn.

Prejudices go poof

The teacher radiated enthusiasm, describing herself as an addict who played the game nightly with her sister. She explained the intricacies of the game, showing us how to transform a random assortment of tiles into a winning hand. Within a couple of weeks, our group of four was playing the game with ease and enjoying it. Over time, more people joined the class. We laughed often, ignored some rules so no one was eliminated early from a game, and roared â??MAJâ?• when we had a winning hand.

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It has become a friendship group, filled with delightful women I would not have met otherwise.

I realized how biased I had been toward older people, even those around my own age. The center is a hive of activity, nowhere near the dingy, drab place I had imagined. What became clear to me was that seniors range in physical and cognitive ability just as do those in any other age group, with perhaps a few more aches and maladies.

My fears and prejudices were dissipated simply by walking through the door and getting to know some other seniors there.

Interviewing the actress Julia Roberts recently, Stephen Colbert asked what she did to relax. â??I play mah-jongg every Tuesday with my girlfriendsâ?• she replied.

Julia, when you are in town, I have a game for you with some very lively seniors.

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1. All Posts

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