ABSTRACT

EVOLVING ABILITIES: A FRAMEWORK FOR AN

AGING AND DISABILITY LIFESTYLE BLOG

By

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May 2015

This project report served as a framework for an aging and disability lifestyle blog named Evolving Abilities. It listed resources and highlighted the vitality and value in aging with a disability by promoting a realistic and dynamic perspective written by a disability gerontologist. The niche audience targeted people aging with disabilities (or chronic health conditions). Evolving Abilities supported connectedness and full inclusion by addressing ageism and ableism.

EVOLVING ABILITIES: A FRAMEWORK FOR AN

AGING AND DISABILITY LIFESTYLE BLOG

A PROJECT REPORT

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I dedicate this Directed Project to my enormously supportive, deeply loving husband and our beautiful daughter.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many Americans experience living with a disability at some point within their lifetime--especially during older age. In fact, over half of older Americans have a disability. Additionally, many more people who were either born with a disability or acquired one in young adulthood are living into older age than any preceding generations. Both aging and disability are two common societal elements historically perceived as negative and unattractive in American culture. The large wave of aging baby boomers presents the best opportunity ever in history to reshape oppressive stereotypes and negative stigmas into a more empowering, respectful, and accessible society for the betterment of all citizens.

Every day, individuals are growing older and many (as well as their families) are turning to the internet in search of information, inspiration, and a sense of community. People inherently desire to live a meaningful life, regardless of age or disability.

This directed project served as a framework for an aging and disability lifestyle blog promoting a realistic, positive, and dynamic approach to aging with a disability written from the perspective of a disability gerontologist. The blog niche audience targeted: people aging with disabilities (or chronic health conditions) and their families.

Background of the Problem

Over the next several decades, the United States population will grow older. Medical and public health advances in the 20th century have led Americans to gain an entire three decades of additional years of life expectancy (Dahmen & Cozma, 2009). A benefactor of this increased life span is a group commonly referred to as the baby boomer generation--individuals born between 1946 and 1964. Nearly 20% of the United States population will be individuals over age 65 by 2030, which is the same year the entire baby boomer cohort will have officially entered into the older population (over 65 years of age; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010).

The baby boomer cohort is a large sized generation that is known for being more likely to be highly educated, occupy managerial positions, encourage gender equality, and be more racially and ethnically diverse than preceding age groups (Frey, 2010). These generational commonalities, in conjunction with their sheer size in numbers, have led to baby boomers having a reputation of being self-concerned--namely, desiring a high quality of life for themselves. Many baby boomers are also avid online users. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center Report on baby boomers in the digital age, 74% of boomers (aged 46-64) use the internet and constitute 34% of the entire internet population (Rainie, 2013). This generation is not expected to age timidly or in any fashion similar to prior generations.

The full societal impact of the aging baby boomer cohort has not yet been realized. It is unknown if ageism (prejudice against and negative stereotypes about older individuals) or if ableism (prejudice against and negative stereotypes about people with disabilities) will be lessened by the onslaught of an educated, diverse, and demanding

baby boomer cohort endeavoring to age with disabilities in style. Although aging is a

biological process, ageism is largely a social construct that shapes an individual's life

span and is currently pervasive in American society (Nussbaum, Pitts, Huber, Raup

Krieger, & Ohs, 2005).

In addition to large numbers of individuals living longer, numerous older people

experience life with one or more disabilities. According to the United States Census

Bureau, over half (51.8%) of individuals aged 65 or older have a disability, and almost

37% of these individuals have a severe disability (Brault, 2012). These disability

statistics do not account for the population living in institutions, such as nursing homes.

If included, the prevalence of disability among older individuals would be even higher.

Aging and disability are inextricably connected and will increasingly have a profound

impact on both society and individual families--becoming an even more prevalent part of

the American experience.

In addition to ageism, older individuals with disabilities can experience ableism.

Similar to the broader cultural impact of ageism, ableism is the negative view and

treatment of people with disabilities that often leads to discrimination against them as less

able, impaired, and/or needing "fixing." Ableism ignores the acceptance and

accommodation of people with disabilities (Wolbring, 2008). The term ableism is a

product of the 1960s and 1970s disability rights movement and is used by disability

studies scholars to describe prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors toward

people with disabilities (Ableism, 2006).

Ageism and ableism are two similarly negative societal constructs that impede

positive aging for all individuals--regardless of age or ability. Positive aging is both a

scientific concept and a mindset. It actively combats internalized negative aging stereotypes, which contribute to the formation of an individual's self-perceptions of aging. In fact, research has found that, on average, individuals with more positive self-perceptions of aging live an entire 7.5 years longer than their less positive counterparts (Levy, Slade, Kasl, & Kunkel, 2002). Positive aging fosters a healthier and happier experience in older age, and can be an effective approach to enhance the quality and quantity of life for all individuals.

<u>Statement of the Problem</u>

The population of individuals age 65 and over is projected to swell to 79.7 million in 2040--representing a large mass of the total U.S. population with 1 in every 5 Americans expected to be elderly (Administration on Aging, 2013). The statistics are very clear. The fastest growing population is older Americans. As this cohort ages, a significantly large portion will live life with one or more disabilities. Nevertheless, American culture is currently ill prepared for embracing and empowering older individuals with disabilities due to oppressive stereotypes and negative stigmas.

Despite the exceedingly high prevalence of disability in older age, as well as the countless topically diverse existing blogs on the internet, there is a shortage of locatable disability gerontologists focusing on a holistic nexus of aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, and positive aging blogging from the unique perspective of an aging expert with a disability. In effect, there is an immense need for a combination of gerontology and disability subject matter experts to educate, advocate, and provide resources to individuals, families, and communities. Many

individuals look to the internet for information and support, but are unable to find qualified disability social gerontologists.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to develop a fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful aging and disability lifestyle blog named "Evolving Abilities" from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with personal experience, training, and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging. The blog niche audience targeted: people aging with disabilities (or chronic health conditions) and their families.

Importance of the Project

This project addressed the gap in awareness of older individuals with disabilities in the social consciousness of America to counter prevailing negative stereotypes and support full inclusion. It aimed to examine aging and disability in a realistic, positive, and proactive light in order to foster dignity and respect for the humanity in everyone-- regardless of age or ability. Putnam (2002) explains aging with a disability as a permanent trend that deserves attention because the collective effects of having a permanent disability over the life course have not been considered; especially in the field of gerontology.

The Evolving Abilities blog endeavored to make older individuals with disabilities more relevant by giving status to this population through a blog dedicated to providing online lifestyle guidance and narratives to successfully navigating this changing landscape. It highlighted the importance of bringing attention to this population in an entertaining and engaging manner with the utmost dignity and respect. Despite the

large population of older individuals living with disabilities, no such blog explicitly addressed the nexus of aging and disability written by a trained gerontologist with a disability existed. As more people age (both with and without disabilities), it is imperative for both individual integrity and social consciousness to dispel negative stereotypes about age and disability. This project benefited aging research by answering the social scientists' call for continued effort in advocating for individuating rather than stereotypic claims about older adults (Nussbaum et al., 2005).

<u>Introduction of the Project to be Developed</u>

The project developed was an aging and disability lifestyle blog accessible to the online public. It contained a combination of user friendly information and vignettes aimed at countering the prevailing negative stereotypes of older people with disabilities to support their full inclusion in society. A blog (also known as weblog) is an interactive website that comes in various forms ranging from a personal diary to media, corporation, government, hobby, marketing, educational, and countless other themed blogs.

Blogs are often based on interest, passion, and expertise to share. It is different than a traditional website because content is added and updated frequently in reverse chronological order, and can be read with blog software (without visiting the actual website). Most importantly, blogs foster a conversational and community feel because bloggers (creators of and contributors to blogs) communicate directly with the audience in the form of replying to comments or posting reader inspired content (Rowse & Garrett, 2012).

The blog's niche was an aging and disability lifestyle blog that increased public awareness and understanding, and contributed to a more inclusive society. It was written

in a coaching style to help people maximize potential in their lives and explore new possibilities. This blog was created and maintained by a trained disability gerontologist dedicated to confronting negative perceptions and representing aging with a disability fairly, with the dignity and respect all individuals deserve.

<div align="center">Operational Definitions</div>

In this directed project, terms are operational as follows:

Ableism: Prejudice and discrimination towards persons and groups with disabilities (Ableism, 2006).

Aging: An active verb describing a life process experienced by all individuals.

Aging in place: The ability to live in one's own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably--regardless of age, income, or ability level.

Ageism: Ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are biased against older individuals (Butler, 1969).

Baby boomer cohort: The American population born between 1946 and 1964.

Blog: Also known as weblog; is a type of website used to display topical content based in interest, passion, and expertise.

Disability: A natural and diverse facet of the human condition that is not inherently negative; an umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. People with disabilities are part of a cultural minority group. Disability is a complex phenomenon. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers.

Lifestyle: The typical way of life of an individual, group, or culture.

Assumptions

The blog developer assumed the blog's design and content will build an audience of readers to address an existing and growing demand for lifestyle information on aging and disabilities. Additionally, it was unknown if individuals would be open to exploring deeper issues, such as the self-imposed implications of ageism and ableism or the complexity of navigating systems. Boomers and younger generations would be in need of positive aging and disability influences in order to combat societal, familial, and personal stressors to foster resilience. It was also unknown if all individuals with disabilities self-identify as having a disability.

Delimitations

Evolving Abilities blog was solely a web based project without a preexisting audience. The blog was limited to posting and commenting on aging and disability related matters. It did not function as an individual advisor or personal caseworker. It was only seen and utilized by individuals online. This project was not designed as a complete solution to issues around aging with a disability. Rather, it was intended to be an affirmative communication and online community tool topically aimed at aging and living with a disability.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this project was to develop a fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful aging and disability lifestyle blog named "Evolving Abilities" from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with training and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging. This chapter presents a review of existing literature on the boomer cohort, ageism, ableism and disability, aging with a disability, positive aging, as well as blogging and technology. These literature based elements created a theoretical foundation in which the aging and disability blog project was based upon.

Boomer Cohort

The baby boomer generation was born between 1946 and 1964. Cohort effects are the commonalities shared among a generation stemming from shared experiences in early life. The baby boomer cohort is understood as a coming of age during a particularly prosperous post-World War II era (filled with a commercial mass media and consumer culture) as idealistic, self-indulgent, and self-absorbed (Adler, 2010). This baby boom generation is so significant in size that 19% of the total United States population will be older Americans by 2030 (when all boomers will be age 65 or older; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010).

By 2040, there will be 79.7 million older individuals, which is over twice their number in 2000. Large numbers of aging Americans also point to a projected increase of people aged 85 and older. In fact, the number of people aged 85 and older will increase from 5.7 million in 2011 to 14.4 million by 2040, which is an 18% increase (Administration on Aging, 2013).

The older population is quickly growing. The large numbers of baby boomers will heavily contribute to the projected changing age structure, which will impact families and society. In addition to size, the baby boomer generation is more likely to be highly educated, occupy managerial positions, encourage gender equality, and be more racially and ethnically diverse than preceding age groups. As boomers age, they will force further economic and social change in America (Frey, 2010).

Many baby boomers are in a stage of life where scholars are referring to them as the senior sandwich generation because a large portion is caring for both older adult parents and younger adult children simultaneously. Four out of every 10 baby boomers (38%) reported providing extensive emotional support to both grown children and aging parents (Pew Research Center: Social & Demographic Trends, 2013). Increased longevity has led to aging parents living longer, and cohort trends (such as delayed marriage and childbearing) have left aging boomers sandwiched between two generations that likely need assistance. In fact, family members generally provide over 75% of all care to the elderly. Baby boomers will, on average, spend at least a third of their adult life with one (or both) parents (and sometimes parents-in-law) over the age of 65. Aging baby boomers navigating these complex intergenerational relationships can experience wide ranges of responsibilities and pressure (Wassel, 2006).

Ageism

The term, "ageism" was introduced by Dr. Robert Butler, M.D. in 1969 to describe age discrimination. In his revolutionary writings, he describes ageism as, "…reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged--a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability, and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death" (Butler, 1969, p. 243). Butler later went on to further contexualize ageism as the "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender (Butler R., 1975, p. 12)." However, unlike racism and sexism, Butler believed ageism to be overlooked by society.

Prior to the middle of the 19th century and well before Butler coined the term, ageism, society admired old age. It became negatively viewed by the time of the industrial revolution when many American families moved from an agricultural way of life to urban settings where youth were seen as more valuable in this new progressive era. In addition to industrialization, health care advances may have also contributed to ageism. The sense of uniqueness from living longer dissipated as larger numbers of individuals lived longer and had less of a communal role within industrialized society (Nolan, 2011).

The International Longevity Center USA understands ageism to be ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are biased against people based on their age (Dahmen & Cozma, 2009). The center considers ageist beliefs and fears of growing old to be culturally entrenched in negative stereotypes and language that must be overcome by first acknowledging aging as a process every single individual experiences. Ageism is

pervasive and currently institutionalized as a form of discrimination in the workplace, healthcare, language, and media--that can take on different types of abuse: physical, emotional, sexual, and financial. Public awareness on ageism is necessary to achieve cultural and personal equality. The International Longevity Center USA finds that older individuals and the public at large are significantly affected by media portrayals that perpetuate negative stereotypes of older people as impaired, cranky, and needy, and can even worsen individual health (Dahmen & Cozma, 2009).

Ageism is a unique type of discrimination because aging is an ever changing aspect of humanity experienced by everyone, and individuals who live long enough can experience ageism first hand. In an examination of ageism, Grefe (2011) cited two root causes,

> First, segregation of age groups in our social life reinforces stereotypical and categorical perceptions of older adults. Second, fear of death and losses associated with aging contribute greatly to social avoidance of and emotional distance from the elderly. (p. 104)

Ageism is so pervasive in society that it often goes undetected or perceived as an appropriate use of language and behaviors.

<center>Disability and Ableism</center>

The precise definition of disability can vary depending on use and context. It can also have fundamental programmatic and legal implications. In the United States Census Bureau's *Current Population Reports on Americans With Disabilities: 2010* report, Brault (2012) utilized disability as a demographic description (similar to gender and race) presented in two categories: with a disability (difficultly doing an activity) and with a

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severe disability (inability to do an activity). In the report, disability was identified as (one or more) difficulty or inability of performing an activity from three domains: communicative, mental, and physical. He specifically delineated the domains as follows:

Communicative domain:

1. Was blind or had difficultly seeing.

2. Was deaf or had difficultly hearing.

3. Had difficulty having their speech understood.

Mental domain:

1. Had a learning disability, an intellectual disability, developmental disability or Alzheimer's disease, senility, or dementia.

2. Had some other mental or emotional condition that seriously interfered with everyday activities.

Physical domain:

1. Used a wheelchair, cane, crutches, or walker.

2. Had difficulty walking a quarter mile, climbing a flight of stairs, lifting something as heavy as a 10-pound bag of groceries, grasping objects, or getting in or out of bed.

3. Listed arthritis or rheumatism, back or spine problem, broken bone or fracture, cancer, cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy, head or spinal cord injury, heart trouble or atherosclerosis, hernia or rupture, high blood pressure, kidney problems, lung or respiratory problem, missing limbs, paralysis, stiffness or deformity of limbs, stomach / digestive problems, stroke, thyroid problem, or

tumor / cyst / growth as a condition contributing to a reported activity limitation. (p. 2)

Formalized systems and society often identify disability in the context of medical models, which view disability as a physiological condition needing repair rather than viewing individuals as whole persons. Bauman and Simser (2013) described disability as,

> …typically understood as a condition which deviates from normal physical, cognitive and/or psychological functioning, resulting in diminished opportunities and quality of life…a biological fact intrinsic to the individual, which often warrants medical intervention and rehabilitation to increase one's quality of life. This common perception is known as the medical model of disability. (p. 6)

Activists and social science scholars contextualize disability in a social model as an experience of barriers due to environmental inaccessibility, as well as a component of cultural and political self identity. Bauman and Simser (2013) explained the social model of disability as a result of recognizing,

> …the "problem" of disability is not exclusively attributed to a condition, but rather from the social and environmental barriers which exclude persons with disability from full participation in society…the larger economic, social and environmental conditions have a profound impact on determining the limitations of a particular physical or psychological variation. While the medical model focuses on fixing the society which creates unnecessary barriers. Often, the removal of social barriers benefits not just the few persons with disabilities, but rather all members of society. (p. 6)

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The World Heath Report (World Health Organization, 2011) identified negative attitudes (beliefs and prejudice) towards people with disabilities as resulting in barriers to education, employment, and social participation. Internalized disability oppression and minority group status can be understood through identity theoretical frameworks that delineate identities such as racial, gender, and sexual orientation. Putnam (2005) identified six domains of political disability identity as (a) self-worth (viewing oneself as equally valuable to others without disabilities), (b) pride (having a sense of pride in being a person with a disability), (c) discrimination (believing people with disabilities are widely and frequently discriminated against), (d) common cause (acknowledging that people with disabilities have common experiences--regardless of diagnosis), (e) policy alternatives (disability barriers can be mediated by improving the contextual relationship between individuals and their environments), and (f) engagement in political action (advocacy to improve policies and systems).

Although the disability community is very diverse, one commonality is uniting-- the experience of ableism. The term ableism (also known as 'disablism' by disability scholars), is multifaceted, complex, and evolving (with varying specificity and proper context of use). Specifically, Campbell (2008) defined disablism as,

> …a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the
> differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed
> disabilities…attitudes and barriers that contribute to the subordination of people
> with disabilities in liberal society…a belief that impairment or disability
> (irrespective of 'type') is inherently negative…able-bodied status is always

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temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody

if they live long enough. (p. 1)

The historic isolation and mistreatment of people with disabilities in the United

States are attributed to a number of factors. Haller (2010) explained,

Because people with disabilities still face many architectural, occupational,

educational, and communication barriers in the U.S., interpersonal contact

between able-bodied and disabled persons is still limited. Therefore, mass media

images still provide many of the cultural representations of disability to American

society. (p. 29)

Existing literature substantiated the need to address ableism (as it exists almost

unconsciously) in beliefs, language, and practices, as well as support 'ability diversity' to

combat prejudice (Wolbring, 2008).

<u>Aging with a Disability</u>

According to the United States Census, 51.8% of non institutionalized Americans

aged 65 and older have a disability, and 36.9% of these individuals have a severe

disability. The incidence and severity of disability increases with age (as does the need

for personal assistance). In fact, 70.5% of people 80 years and older have a disability.

Since these statistics do not include people in nursing homes, Brault (2012) quantified

that population as, "Approximately 1.3 million people aged 65 and older were living in

nursing facilities in 2010. Were this population included, the disability rates for older age

groups, and for people overall, would likely be higher." (p. 6)

Trends in older adult disability point to more recent cohorts becoming more

disabled in part because advanced medical technology has increased the number of older

adults with disabilities living longer (Lin, Beck, Finch, Hummer, & Master, 2012). The World Report on Disability (World Health Organization, 2011) described aging with a disability as,

> …part of the human condition--almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning. Disability is complex, and the interventions to overcome the disadvantages associated with disability are multiple and systemic--varying with the context. (p. 7)

> If individuals live long enough, disability is a category most people will identify with. Even though disability increases with age, more people with early-onset disabilities are also living longer into older age due to medical and social advances. Putnam (2007) believed, "…we are at the forefront of a new trend--aging with long term disability…pushing the boundaries of gerontological science through diversification of the aging population." (p. 5)

Despite the large numbers of individuals aging with disabilities, the formalized establishment of disability studies, as well as the growing prominence of disability social models, theories of aging within gerontology do not account for the impact of disability throughout the course of life (Putnam, 2002).

> The cumulative effects of having a permanent physical impairment have not been well studied as they relate to aging over the life course…Disability is a complex construct, and living with long-term physical impairment or experiencing disability continually over the life course likely has substantial influence on the aging process. (p. 800)

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Social models of disability need to be further included into theories of aging in order to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between disability and aging, which will led to a more complete evaluation of age related issues (Putnam, 2002).

Fields outside of gerontology are exploring the connection between ableism and ageism. Christine Overall (2006), Professor of Philosophy, found ableism and ageism as systems of oppression with much in common. She challenged the notion that aging and disability are inherently biological, material systems (i.e. numbers of years aged or physical abnormalities). Rather, they are socially constructed. Assuming aging and disability are both fixed biological foundations result in grossly underestimating the role of culture. In fact, Overall asserted that in both cases of ableism and ageism,

> Social practices and institutions establish and reinforce negative values that make rather ordinary characteristics of some human beings into liabilities and stigmata. The systems of ableism and ageism function to make, respectively, certain bodily features (limbs, organs, or systems), and certain numbers of years lived into social liabilities, rationalizations for subordination, and sources of shame…are intertwined in malignantly effective ways that result in disrespect, reduction of autonomy, and the disregard of rights…almost everyone participates in the social conspiracy to pretend that there are no impaired or aged people. Assimilationist pressures are among the key tools of oppressive systems such as ableism and ageism. (pp. 131-132)

Philosophically, Overall (2006) found significant cultural parallels between old age and impairment and between ageism and ableism as existing social constructs of age and ability, which are not biologically based.

<center>Positive Aging</center>

A landmark longitudinal study out of Yale University examined whether positive self-perceptions about one's aging influenced survival (Levy, Slade, Kasl, & Kunkel, 2002). The sample consisted of 660 individuals aged 50 and older who participated in a community-based survey, and resulting data was matched against mortality data from the National Death Index.

The connection between self-perception of aging and longevity had never fully examined positive factors as benefits to aging before this study. One theory looked at the notion that older individuals' internalized age stereotypes contributed to the formation of their self perceptions of aging, which can result in a physiological outcome. People develop age-related stereotypes many years before becoming old themselves because younger people usually accept these notions without question. Younger individuals who hold negative aging stereotypes to be true will most likely become older individuals with negative self-stereotypes. Such deeply ingrained personal and societal negative concepts of aging can lead to cognitive and behavioral decline (as the deficiency of health and function are difficult to reverse; Levy et al., 2002).

Yale researchers sited two reasons for internalized aging self-stereotypes: aging self-stereotypes can flourish without even being noticed and older individuals can harbor negative feelings toward other older individuals. Both positive and negative stereotypes are communicated through social interactions. Negative aging stereotypes that evolve into self-stereotype come with a steep cost--impacted longevity (Levy et al., 2002).

In fact, this research found a statistically relevant link between self-perception of aging and longevity. As much as 75% of longevity may be due to non-genetic attributes,

including psychological and behavioral factors (when controlling for functional health). The results supported the hypothesis of the study: those with more positive aging self-perceptions at baseline live longer. The study also identified the "will to live" as a mechanism influenced by self-perceptions.

> The robustness of our findings is further suggested by our demonstration that those in the more positive self-perception of aging group demonstrated better survival among men as well as with women, those with better as well as worse functional health, those less than 60 years and over, those less than 70 years as well as 70 years and over, those with lower as well as higher socioeconomic status, and those who reported experiencing loneliness as well as those who did not. (Levy et al., 2002, pp. 267-268)

Positive self-perceptions of aging are more powerful than having healthy levels of blood pressure, cholesterol, and body fat, as well as no smoking and moderate exercise. Despite the strong relationship between negative self-stereotypes and aging, some individuals are able to cope and overcome the detrimental effects. The more positive self-perceptions of aging are directly related to a greater will to live. Although negative self-perceptions can reduce life expectancy, positive self-perceptions can lengthen life. Researchers recommended emphasizing positive aging stereotypes, deemphasizing negative aging stereotypes, and stated, "A comprehensive remedy requires that the denigrating views and actions directed at elderly targets undergo delegitimization by the same society that has been generating them." (Levy et al., 2002, p. 268)

Blogging and Technology

Countless blogs live on the internet. As of 2011, 151 million blogs were identified (not counting the 73 million Chinese blogs; Garden, 2011). Blogs started growing in popularity during the late 1990's when blogging software made it easier and possible for people with varying technological abilities to publish blogs. A blog is an interactive website often based on interest, passion, and expertise to share. While many are personal in nature, a growing number are journalistic or related to current events (Garden, 2011).

Blogs are different than traditional websites because content is added and updated frequently in reverse chronological order, and can be subscribed to and read with blog software (without visiting the actual website address). Most importantly, blogs foster a conversational and community feel because bloggers (creators of and contributors to blogs) communicate directly with the audience in the form of replying to comments or posting reader inspired content (Rowse & Garrett, 2012). Blogs are a place where online discussions and debates can take place through comments. There is also a trend towards professionalization with author contributions by different professionals. This genre of journalism emphasizes personalization, audience participation, and connecting with other sources of information (Garden, 2011).

Haller (2010), a disability and media scholar, considered disability-related blogs written by people with disabilities to be empowering forums to discuss issues in ways mainstream media does not cover. Haller understood blogs to be participatory journalism that can be easily shared through social media (other blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) and a means of developing relationships and connecting people. Haller described

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blogs as offering, "…a powerful way for many people with disabilities to connect with others and get their unique perspective on the world out to the larger society." (p. 4)

The success of blogs subsists on technology and the people who utilize that technology. According to 2012 research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, many seniors use the internet. In fact, 53% of Americans aged 65 and over went online. Of these individuals, 70% were online every day and 39% had high speed internet connections at home. Among 50 to 64 year olds, 77% were online every day and 62% had high speed internet connection (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012).

According to a 2010 Pew Research Center Report on baby boomers in the digital age (Rainie, 2013), 74% of boomers used the internet and constituted 34% of the entire internet population. Out of online boomers, 69% used the internet daily and 36% went online several times a day. Boomers had similar internet usage and activity as compared to other younger age groups--spending time checking email, using search engines, seeking health information, and reading news. Other activities included: researching products, buying goods, making travel reservations, and online banking. 45% of boomer internet users browsed video sharing sites, 26% read blogs, and 8% blogged themselves (Rainie, 2013).

Another study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Zickuhr, 2011), examined technical tools utilized by both younger boomers (1955-1964) and older boomers (1946-1954). Research found 25% of younger boomers and 15% of older boomers used their cell phones to access the internet. Among younger boomers, 69% owned a desktop and 49% owned a laptop, along with older boomers owning desktops at 64% and laptops at 43%. A recent social networking assessment by the Pew Research

Center found 60% of 50-64 years olds used social networking sites (such as Facebook) as compared to 43% of individuals 65 years of age or older (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Staying in touch with family was the top reason for using social networking (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). Additionally, 54% of adults aged 50-64 and 31% of adults aged 65 or older used video-sharing sites, such as YouTube (Moore, 2011).

A Pew Research Center report on how American adults living with chronic health conditions gather and share health information online (Fox & Duggan, 2013) found 45% of U.S. adults lived with chronic health conditions, and 72% of these adults used the internet. These individuals were more likely to, "read or watch something online about someone else's personal health experience." (p. 3)

In addition to people with chronic health conditions utilizing the internet for information and community support, caregivers were also going online (Fox, Duggan, & Purcell, 2013). 39% of American adults were caregivers for an adult or child with significant health issues. Caregivers were more likely to, "Read online about someone else's personal health experiences…" and "find more information about handling caregiver stress" as well as "find others with similar health concerns." (p. 3)

Researchers found the rate of care giving likely to rise. Forty-seven percent of U.S. adults believed they were likely to care for an aging family member at some point in their life. Pew Research Center also found 75% of U.S. adults living with a chronic condition, and that the daily management of these conditions may go to untrained family members, which is why caregivers seek out online sources of information and support (Fox, Duggan, & Purcell, 2013).

Summary of the Literature

The theoretical and philosophical foundation for this disability and aging blog project was based upon close examination of the boomer cohort, ageism, disability, ableism, aging with a disability, positive aging, as well as blogging and technology.

The characteristics of the baby boomer generation point toward a unique and large body of aging individuals who are often online. This group was frequently found caring for aging family members, acquiring or aging with disabilities, and looking to the internet as a source of information and support.

The notion and definition of disability is complex and can be best understood when comparing the medical model to the social model of disability. Both ageism and ableism are pervasive and derogating to individuals as well as to society as a whole and needs to be alleviated. The nature and effects of ageism can be so detrimental that an average of 7.5 years in longevity is lost to those who do not view aging positively. Buying into negative self-stereotypes comes with a high cost of life.

Aging with a disability is very common, yet it garners little interest in society or academia. There was a lack of abundance in existing literature on aging with a disability. Considering the pervasive existence of ageism and ableism, aging with a disability holds little perceived value to our culture--emotionally and physiologically harming a large portion of our population. Positive aging is a statistically proven valuable approach to aging that turns anti-aging sentiment on its head, and results in a higher quality of life in older age. Blogging is one way in which a positive approach to aging and disability can be popularized to help defeat ageism and ableism. Anyone with an internet connection can have access to moving content that honestly and directly addresses ableism and

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ageism. This project addressed the need to bring positive attention to older adults aging

with a disability.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to develop a fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful aging and disability lifestyle blog named "Evolving Abilities" from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with personal experience, training, and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging.

The six domains covered by the review of literature closely examined the boomer cohort, ageism, disability and ableism, aging with a disability, positive aging, and blogging and technology. These spheres of influence contextualize the rampant ageism and ableism in society, which negatively affects the quality and quantity of life for everyone--especially older Americans with disabilities. There is a significant necessity for elevating the humanity and value of older individuals with disabilities within American society, as well as providing tools, tips, and resources to aid in successfully navigating changes in our older lives and evolving abilities. This need is rapidly growing as the large baby boomer cohort continues to age into older adulthood.

A publicly accessible aging and disability lifestyle blog written by a disability gerontologist containing tips and conversations is a meaningful tool. There is a fear of aging and living life with a disability that is part of the American social construct and it must be continually addressed in order to achieve meaningful participation by all

individuals. This blog project helped fight against ageism and ableism by bringing elevated levels of dignity to and awareness of older individuals aging with disabilities.

<center>Targeted Audience</center>

Fundamental to the project's targeted online niche audience were people aging with disabilities (or chronic health conditions) and their families. The Review of Literature substantiated these specific niches as having a propensity to seek out information, support, and a likeminded community around age and disability related topics.

Aging Americans are reshaping the course of aging and disability to address new challenges and opportunities for societal, familial, and individual growth. The blog aspired to assist readers in figuring out how to successfully navigate these changes that can oftentimes be overwhelming, as well as positively shifting self-perceptions.

<center>Blog Project Development</center>

A blog is a justified preferred medium for this directed project because the literature review confirmed people with disabilities and chronic health conditions go online to seek support, advice, and a sense of community. Many of these individuals use social networking sites (like Facebook), which is a strong tool for sharing blog posts. Blogs foster a conversational and community feel because bloggers (creators of and contributors to blogs) communicate directly with the audience in the form of replying to comments or posting reader inspired content. According to Rowse and Garrett (2012), specialty niche blogging fueled by passion and expertise draw the highest numbers of readers to a blog. The literature review established aging and disability as a compelling and rapidly growing subject matter area with extensive possible content material.

<center>27</center>

The blogger examined different blogging platforms and site hosting options. In an interview with internet entrepreneur Trey Glauser on September 20, 2013, he explained his recommendations to novice bloggers,

I suggest starting with Blogger by Google or Wordpress.com because they're free and easy to get started. If the blog takes off, gets traffic, and you're sure you want to put more time and energy into it, you can switch to something more powerful like Wordpress.org. In that case, you'd host it yourself, and actually can pay to have someone make it look sleek. Keep in mind, blogs are all about content. Starting with a free platform is a good first step. You will only get traffic if people find your information and insights useful. Also, don't forget to network with other blogs.

Professional bloggers Rowse and Garrett (2012) echo some of Glauser's sentiments and recommend taking blog goals, budget, and technical expertise into consideration. The three most popular platforms for professional bloggers are: Wordpress.org (allows for maximized personalization, requires technical expertise and money), followed by Blogger (free, easy to use, less configurable, and popular with novices), and Wordpress.com (free version is easy to set up, not as configurable as Wordpress.org, but upgrades can be purchased).

After consulting expert advice on blog platforms and hosting, the methodology for developing the project name was twofold. First, an examination of popular key terms related to this project was conducted using Google Trends (Google, 2013). Google Trends is an internet tool that quantifies the popularity of words typed into the Google search engine. Among searched terms, the highest ranking related word was 'disability'

followed by 'aging' and 'abilities.' Searches for 'gerontologist,' 'gerontology,' and 'boomer' resulted in fewer hits.

Secondly, the capacity for a blog name to become an easily memorable brand was considered. According to experts Rowse and Garrett (2012), it is far more important for a blog to be memorable and well branded than to solely contain key words. The authors further explain that shorter blog names tend to be more successful than longer ones. The name "Evolving Abilities" is a short to moderate length name that was unique and not registered to anyone. Evolving Abilities vividly reflected the blog's positive and proactive disposition towards aging and disability. Two simple, yet positive words as the name facilitated brand recognition and a sense of positivity among readers.

No existing blogs on the specific topic of aging with a disability written by a disability gerontologist was easily found. The closest discovered blog was Modern Senior, which launched in 2010 and is, "dedicated to bringing you the latest news on health and mobility related news to the elder population and those with disabilities" (Blitchok, 2013). Modern Senior covered mostly topical issues related to the general senior population with some postings linked to mobility. Evolving Abilities directly addressed ageism and ableism, and views disability as multi-dimensional--well beyond the limits of mobility impairment.

The financial start up of blogging was minimal. Evolving Abilities utilized low cost blogging software and site hosting, as well as an existing high speed internet connection, personal computer, webcam, and digital camera. The most significant cost occurred in the form of personal time used to maintain and promote the blog. The blogger personally determined the number of weekly hours dedicated to blog postings,

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engaging with readers through comments, networking with other blogs, and overall marketing.

The blogger addressed copyright notice and legal disclaimers to mitigate any possible liability issues and intellectual property rights violations. The blogger also properly cited works from other authors and attributed photographs.

The blog style was visually attractive, fun, accessible, and easy to read. Content development arose from a mix of related topics and relevant publications from academically respected sources. It included original works, articles from other authors worth sharing, reviews, special guest contributions, and links to external resources. A loyal readership was fostered though good, useable, fun, and relatable content. Traffic (visitors to the blog) was generated though social media marketing and networking with other blogs. Haller (2010) considers the social networking site, Facebook, to be a powerful promotional tool for blogs (especially for reaching people with disabilities). Ongoing readership satisfaction will be reviewed on a bi-annual basis by conducting a readership survey to assess blog usefulness, likeability, and preferred content.

Blogger Credibility

The blogger (person who developed this blog project) was a Master's of Science in Gerontology Candidate, and was responsible for blog style, content, management, and public relations. She is a known advocate in the disability rights community and is also a trained gerontologist. The blogger's credibility was further established by appropriately and thoughtfully incorporating published advocacy pieces, relevant academic journal articles, as well as scientific studies.

This blog project was greatly shaped by the blogger's professional gerontology training and personal insight as an individual living with a significant disability. In addition to being a Gerontologist, the blogger is a trained Aging in Place Specialist by the National Home Builders Association, holds an Executive Certificate in Home Modification, is a Certified Chronic Disease Self Management program facilitator, consults, and is a nonprofit board member. The blogger is a member of Sigma Phi Omega, the National Gerontology Academic Honor and Professional Society, as well as the Gerontology Society of America and the American Society on Aging.

As a former political staffer to a United States Senator and long time independent living advocate for people with disabilities, the blogger is deeply connected to a wider online community of people with disabilities across America. There were no ethical issues in developing or executing the blog project. Moreover, the professional and personal background of the blogger offered a wide array of potential future opportunities for collaborating with agencies, organizations, and businesses, as well as a built in audience of readers to frequent Evolving Abilities.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this project was to develop a fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful aging and disability lifestyle blog named "Evolving Abilities" from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with personal experience, training, and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging. It aimed to examine aging and disability in a realistic, positive, and proactive light in order to foster dignity and respect for the humanity in everyone--regardless of age or ability. This project addressed the gap in awareness of older individuals with disabilities to counter prevailing negative stereotypes and support full inclusion. This chapter describes the blog development process, appearance of blog, and general content areas.

Blog Development Process

The first step in blog development was choosing a blog platform. Wordpress.com was selected for its ease of use, professional appearance, navigation, readership statistics interface, and upgradable customization options. The second step was registering the custom domain name: www.evolvingabilities.com. The third step was selecting a theme for the blog's appearance. Wordpress' "Suits Theme" in the colors of black, white, and green was chosen for it's clean, easy to read layout (colors such as red were avoided in order for the site to be accessible to people with color blindness).

The theme complies with website accessibility standards. The fifth step was developing and organizing the site's menus and pages. The sixth step involved a multifaceted process of content development for static text, resources, and chronological posts.

<div align="center">Appearance of Blog</div>

As seen in Appendix A, the home screen contained white text on a black banner with a green and white menu bar sitting above black text on a white background. The banner read the blog's name in large lettering, "Evolving Abilities" with the tag line, "vibrant aging with a disability." The default home screen listed blog posts (with a "Leave a comment" link and a "Share on Social Media" widget). There was also a side bar with a welcome video from the author, a "Follow this blog" button, "Recent Posts" links, and a "Categories" drop down menu. Appendix B displays the footer (bottom of the blog), which had static text entitled "Copyright Notice and Disclaimer."

Blog posts were located on the home screen as well as under the "Blog" menu button, and some posts contained media images or videos. The second item on the menu bar was "Resources," and it linked to a page that categorized disability and/or aging resources into 10 hyperlinked general topical areas (see Appendix C). The 10 hyperlinks were then individually nested under "Resources" (see Appendix D).

The third item on the menu bar was, "Disability Gerontology" (see Appendix E). It was a page of text that described the logic behind the blog. The fourth item on the menu bar, "About," explained the blog's mission and author (see Appendix F). The fifth item on the menu bar, "Contact," contained a web form to contact the blog's author (see Appendix G). The sixth and last item on the menu bar "About YOU" asked readers to

answer questions based on individual interests in order to gather readership information (see Appendix H).

<div align="center">General Content Areas</div>

<u>Blog</u>:

Blog content (see Appendix A) was generated from several sources, including: aggregate news sites based on topics and key words, Gerontology related publications, peer-reviewed journals, guest contributions, controversial hot topics, personal stories and profiles, current events, and original content. Topics focused on aging and / or disability. Blog tone was decidedly positive and conversational. Published blog post titles included: "Happy Deaf Awareness Week," "Older Adult with Down Syndrome Made a Difference," "The 2015 White House Conference on Aging," "A Personal Take on Health," "September is Pain Awareness Month," "Key to Aging Well with a Disability: Resilience," "Profile: Dr. Fernando Torres-Gil," "Elder Justice Initiative," "Accessible Workout Equipment," "Aging with a Disability to a Theatre Near You," " 2014's Best and Worst Cities for People with Disabilities," "Better off Dead than Age with a Disability?" "Steven Hawking Bio Pic," "GOTV – Get Out The Vote Next Week," "Disability Sexy," and "Profile: Christy from Scottdale, PA."

<u>Resources</u>:

Content and websites listed under the "Resources" page were chosen based on user friendliness, quality of content, and relevance to aging and / or disability in the United States.   The following hyperlinked pages were categorized by issue area and nested under "Resources:" "Advocacy," "Benefits & Community-Based Services," "Emergency Preparedness," "Employment," "Health," "Housing Options &

Modifications," "Legal," "Lifelong Learning," "Personal Care Assistance & Caregiving,"

and "Transportation" (see Appendix D). Extraneous details were left out when

describing resource listings to facilitate a less overwhelming experience for the reader.

<u>Disability Gerontology</u>:

 This static page (see Appendix E) adapted language from the Project Proposal to

describe, define, and contextualize disability and aging for blog readers. The static page

read as follows:

 I've developed the term Disability Gerontology to draw attention to aging with a

 disability. Despite the close connection between aging and disability, the field of

 Gerontology (the study of aging) has not traditionally considered the effects of a

 permanent disability over a lifetime. Aging with a disability (or chronic health

 condition) is a very common experience that deserves attention and respect.

 Disability is a natural and diverse part of the human experience. It is not

 inherently negative. Disability is often used as a general term describing

 impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. In fact, people

 with disabilities are part of a cultural minority group. Removing physical and

 social barriers empower people with disabilities.

 Many people experience living with a disability at some point within their

 lifetime--especially during older age. Additionally, individuals with lifelong

 disabilities are living into older age more than ever before thanks to medical and

 social progress during the 20th century.

 Today, over half of individuals aged 65 or older have a disability, and almost 37%

 of these individuals have a severe disability. In fact, the population of individuals

age 65 and over is projected to swell to 79.7 million in 2040--representing a large

mass of the total U.S. population with one in every five Americans expected to be

elderly. The statistics are very clear. The fastest growing population is older

Americans and a significantly large portion will live life with one or more

disabilities.

Both aging and disability are historically thought of as negative and unattractive.

This happens conscious and unconsciously. However, it is undeserved and very

harmful to the wellbeing of individuals aging with disabilities.

Ageism is ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are biased against older

individuals. Similar to ageism, ableism is a term used by disability studies

scholars and advocates describing prejudice and discrimination toward people

with disabilities. The word is a product of the 1960's disability rights movement.

Ableism judges people as less able, impaired, and/or needing "fixing"--leading to

all types of discrimination. It ignores the acceptance and accommodation of

people with disabilities.

Both ageism and ableism have been individually studied. However, little

attention has been given to the combined experience of ageism and ableism.

Ageism and ableism get in the way of positive aging for all individuals--

regardless of age or ability.

Positive aging is a mindset. It actively combats internalized negative aging

stereotypes. These stereotypes contribute to the foundation of an individual's

self-perception of aging. In fact, research has found that, on average, individuals

with more positive self-perceptions of aging live an entire seven and a half years

longer than their less positive peers (Levy, Slade, Kasl, & Kunkel, 2002).

Positive aging promotes a healthier and happier experience in older age, and can be an effective approach to enhance the quality and quantity of life for all individuals.

Aging with a disability must be brought to light in a realistic and positive way to counter the widespread existence of ageism and ableism. The large wave of aging Americans presents the best opportunity ever in history to reshape oppressive stereotypes and negative stigmas into a more empowering, respectful, and accessible society for the betterment of all.

About:

This static page (see Appendix F) described Evolving Abilities' mission and author:

Evolving Abilities is a lifestyle blog promoting a positive and dynamic approach to aging with a disability or chronic health condition. It is written from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with experience, training, and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging. You can find a list of resources on related topics for information and support.

Mission: Evolving Abilities aims to be fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful blog for people aging with disabilities (or chronic health conditions) and their families.

The Author: Gerontologist Gina Semenza is a Master's of Science in Gerontology Candidate from California State University, Long Beach. Evolving

Abilities grew out of her Directed Project, and is greatly shaped by her professional training in aging and personal insight as an individual living with a significant disability.

Gina is a consultant and a trained Aging in Place Specialist by the National Home Builders Association, holds an Executive Certificate in Home Modification from the University of Southern California, is a Certified Chronic Disease Self Management program facilitator, and is a nonprofit board member. She is also a member of Sigma Phi Omega, the National Gerontology Academic Honor and Professional Society, as well as the Gerontology Society of America and the American Society on Aging.

Gina is a power wheelchair user and lives with her wonderful husband and adorable baby daughter in California.

Contact:

This static page (see Appendix G) contained a contact form and tells readers "Feel free to share your story, ask a question, or send a suggestion!"

About YOU:

This static page (see Appendix H) contained six questions for the reader to answer anonymously about their related interests and key demographics.

Copyright Notice and Disclaimer:

This static footnote (see Appendix B) read,

© Gina Semenza and Evolving Abilities, 2014. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this blog's author and owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used,

provided that full and clear credit is given to Gina Semenza and Evolving

Abilities with appropriate and specific direction to the original content. Evolving

Abilities is not responsible for the content, information, or services which may

appear on any off-site pages, websites, or links referenced on this website.

External links are provided for convenience only and their presence does not

imply any kind of endorsement by Evolving Abilities of those pages or links, or

any endorsement of the contents or material contained in them.

Information on how to obtain the copyright notice and its language was found on

the Wordpress.com website (Wordpress.com, 2014).

Summary

The blog project was achieved by executing a planned development process that

included thoughtful selection of the blog software and website hosting platform. The

blog layout aimed to look clean, easily navigable, and accessible. Key elements of the

blog included a topical variety of relevant blog postings and a useful "Resources" page.

The "Copyright Notice & Disclaimer" footnote was important to include in order to deter

improper use of the blogger's original content. It was also imperative to have the

"Disability Gerontology" page explain the foundational concepts and nexus of disability,

aging, ableism, and ageism within the confines of current societal norms. The resulting

blog project reflects its mission of highlighting the vitality and value in aging with a

disability.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to develop a fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful aging and disability lifestyle blog named "Evolving Abilities" from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with personal experience, training, and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging. It aimed to examine aging and disability in a realistic, positive, and proactive light in order to foster dignity and respect for the humanity in everyone--regardless of age or ability. This project addressed the gap in awareness of older individuals with disabilities to counter prevailing negative stereotypes and support full inclusion. This final chapter presents the evaluation of the project, implementation, recommendations, project role, and summary and conclusions.

Evaluation of Project

The review of literature examining the boomer cohort, ageism, ableism and disability, aging with a disability, positive aging, as well as blogging and technology was the basis for developing Evolving Abilities. The finished blog project related to a sizeable (and growing) population of people with disabilities desiring aging and disability related information though Evolving Abilities' comprehensive "Resources" section. It directly supported this cohort seeking relevant online resources. The review of literature on blogging and technology use aided in choosing a software platform and also in

understanding blog visitor habits. Ageism was addressed throughout the blog by numerous posts that directly and indirectly advocated against negative age bias. Similarly, negating the harmful effects of ableism was achieved through blog posts that centered on positive aging and proactively living life with a disability.

The blog project was strategically distributed to key individuals in the aging and disability communities for informal feedback. Suggestions and comments included, 'craft a section that clearly presents "ableism" and contrasts it with Evolving Abilities,' 'the literacy level for a public blog is too high and the "Disability Gerontology" page is too academic,' and 'be sure your site meets accessibility standards and can be read by screen readers.' Feedback was managed by completely modifying the appearance and readability of the "Disability Gerontology" page to have simpler sentence structures and replaced college level terms with everyday words. The definition of "Ableism" and how it pertains to the blog site was explained and visually delineated. Site accessibility was confirmed and alternative tags for screen readers were placed with photographs.

Reader feedback was managed though the "Comments" link below each posting as well as through the creation of user questions nested under the menu item "About YOU" (see Appendix H) in order to continue improvements and make the blog attractive to wider audiences. Specific readership metrics for frequency of site visits were gathered from the Dashboard (blogging tools home screen) on the Wordpress.com site.

Implementation

The main step in the implementation of the blog to the general population was allowing it to be searchable through internet searches – a function achieved by selecting the appropriate blog settings. Also, a YouTube channel was created to house Evolving Abilities original video content.

Recommendations and Future Enhancements

Recommendations for future projects related to Evolving Abilities centers around media, marketing, and blogging techniques. Specific recommendations include: increasing the number of images, videos, and positive vignettes of people who are successfully aging with disabilities. Creating public Evolving Abilities Facebook and Twitter pages would serve as social media promotional vehicles. Networking with other blogs as well as developing content for established sites like the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP, Inc., 2015) would promote and lend credibility to Evolving Abilities. Lastly, implementing search engine optimization techniques would increase site traffic and visibility.

Project Role

The process of conceptualizing, creating, and building Evolving Abilities has been both personally and professionally challenging, insightful, and deeply satisfying. The blog's creator began this project with absolutely no blog building or writing experience. Aside from a very steep learning curve, other challenges included: narrowing the blog target audience and defining disability for a wider market. Conquering these issues gave way to a public online forum that contributed to a richer understanding of the lives of people aging with disabilities across the life course.

Initially, the blog's creator wanted the site to appeal to the general boomer cohort and others aging without disabilities (in addition to those aging with disabilities). This made the blog too general to cultivate a niche market. Narrowing the blog's targeted audience to people aging with disabilities and their families enabled the blog to become a more powerful tool in serving and highlighting a vastly underserved and neglected audience.

For the purposes of this project, defining disability for a larger, nonacademic audience was more challenging than anticipated. Although the concept of disability is familiar to most individuals, many (including those with disabilities) are unaware of the immense amount of internalized ableism and overall negative societal bias against aging with a disability, which complicates how disability ought to be defined. The project's chosen definition of disability was,

> Disability is a natural and diverse part of the human experience. It is not
> inherently negative. Disability is often used as a general term describing
> impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. In fact, people
> with disabilities are part of a cultural minority group. Removing physical and
> social barriers empower people with disabilities (see Appendix E).

In order to further combat ableism, this purposefully broad definition stayed away from language that medicalizes disability. When disability is defined by examples of certain diseases, diagnoses, or limitations, someone is inevitably left out and, moreover, the focus is inherently on deficits and malfunctions--not shared experiences. This is known as the medical model of disability, and individuating disability and aging perpetuates isolation and stigma. It is for these specific reasons that a social model

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definition of disability was used. It was important to the blog creator that visitors with varying types of disabilities focused on common experiences in order to foster a more positive, stronger, and empowering connection to the content and one another.

The "Resources" section of Evolving Abilities (see Appendix C) directly contributed to the field of Gerontology because it consolidated a user friendly and comprehensive resources list (see Appendix E). It was useable by professionals and families alike to address immediate or anticipated needs.

According to Putnam (2002), aging with a disability is a lasting trend that deserves attention because the collective effects of having a permanent disability over the life course have not been traditionally considered; especially in the field of Gerontology. Evolving Abilities enriched the field of Gerontology by contributing to a deeper understanding of the lives of people aging with disabilities across the life course. Their life experiences offer valuable lessons learned and beneficial insight.

<div align="center">Summary and Conclusions</div>

The field of Gerontology is enhanced by illuminating the lives of people aging with disabilities. It is imperative for people aging with disabilities to have access to relevant resources as well as connectivity to a wider community of individuals endeavoring to experience the ageing process in the utmost proactive and positive manner. When aging with a disability is normalized, fear and negativity is removed, which directly leads to a higher quality of life for individuals and families touched by aging and disability. Evolving Abilities empowered people aging with disabilities by promoting connectedness and combating ageism, ableism, and feelings of isolation through highlighting vibrant aging with a disability.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

HOME SCREEN

PROFILE: CATHERINE & RALPH – CAREGIVERS WITH DISABILITIES

Ralph & Catherine

Most times when caregivers are discussed, it's within the context of someone without a disability caring for someone with disabilities. The popular paradigm almost never includes the real truth: people with disabilities are caregivers too.

Meet a wonderful married couple: Catherine and Ralph. Catherine is a long time power chair user and Ralph was born with a visual impairment. They are both retired civil servants and founding leaders in the disability rights movement. There are many things that define who they are: avid travelers, natural leaders, and wonderful caregivers. (more...)

Share this:

★ Like
Be the first to like this.

Posted in Aging, Aging and disability, Chronic Disease Self Management, Disability, Personal Stories, Positive Aging and tagged aging, aging parents, caregivers, caregiving, complex healthcare needs, disability, stress, visual impairment, wheelchair on January 26, 2015. Leave a comment › Edit

FACT OF THE DAY

According to the Administration on Aging, an average of **10,000 people turn 65 years old everyday**, and **72 million older adults are projected to live in the US by 2030**.

RECENT POSTS

Profile: Catherine & Ralph – Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle Strength to Sexuality...Real Life Aging and Disability

Profile: Christy from Scottdale, PA

Bette Davis Quote

FOLLOW BLOG VIA EMAIL

Click to follow this blog and receive notifications of new posts by email.

FOLLOW

CATEGORIES

Select Category ▼

APPENDIX B

FOOTER (COPYRIGHT NOTICE AND DISCLAIMER)

APPENDIX C

RESOURCES

RESOURCES

Navigating resources for aging with a disability can sometimes be overwhelming, but it's not impossible. The topics below might be a good place to start.

- Advocacy
- Benefits & Community-Based Services
- Emergency Preparedness
- Employment
- Health
- Housing Options & Modifications
- Legal
- Lifelong Learning
- Personal Care Assistance & Caregiving
- Transportation

Find a fantastic link that should be added to this library or is a link not working? Tell me below:

Name

ginasemenza

Email

APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL PAGES NESTED UNDER RESOURCES

Individual Pages Nested Under Resources, Advocacy

ADVOCACY

- Americans with Disabilities Act Voting Rights document from the Department of Justice outlines the legal rights of voters with disabilities

- Contact your elected officials by simply entering your zip code. Individuals often contact elected officials for the purposes of seeking individual casework assistance with a government agency (or service) as well as advocating for or against policy

- Vote 411 helps voters with the voting process

- One Vote encourages people with disabilities to vote

- (see also Legal)

- * Don't forget, other organizations listed in the Resources list often have (or know of) advocacy opportunities in specific issue areas of interest.

Find a fantastic link that should be added to this library or is a link not working? Tell me below:

Name

BENEFITS & COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Local Information Centers

- Area Agencies on Aging are local informational centers on aging (and/or disability) related services and programming

- Centers for Independent Living are local informational centers on disability (and/or aging) related services and programming

- Aging and Disability Resource Centers are local informational centers on disability and aging related services and programming (*not found in all communities)

Online Information

- Benefits.gov website helps determine if an individual qualifies for any public programs

- Eldercare Locator website helps find local services

- Disability.gov website is a clearing house for disability information and lists benefit resources

- If you live in Arizona, California, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, or New Jersey,

WELCOME

150126 133431

RECENT POSTS

Profile: Catherine & Ralph – Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle Strength to Sexuality…Real Life Aging and Disability

Profile: Christy from Scottdale, PA

Bette Davis Quote

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- American Red Cross disaster preparation booklets for people with disabilities and seniors

- Disability.gov is a clearing house for disability information and lists emergency preparedness resources

- DisasterAssistance.gov helps you find and apply for disaster aid

- Ready.gov helps to plan and stay informed on disasters

Find a fantastic link that should be added to this library or is a link not working? Tell me below:

Name

WELCOME

RECENT POSTS

Profile: Catherine & Ralph – Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Individual Pages Nested Under Resources, Employment

EMPLOYMENT

Local Information Centers

- American Job Center – find a local office, search for jobs, and get career information
- Centers for Independent Living are local informational centers on disability (and/or aging) related services and programming
- Aging and Disability Resource Centers are local informational centers on disability and aging related services and programming (*not found in all communities)
- The federal government's Rehabilitation Services Administration provides funding to all states for vocational training and rehabilitation for people with disabilities. Check out your local state vocational rehabilitation agency for more details.

Online Resources

- Senior Community Service Employment Program provides training and part-time community service work that will start you on the path toward financial stability.
- Onestop tips for older workers
- Hiring Older Workers
- AARP Job Hunting
- Office of Disability Employment Policy: Older Workers
- On benefits, but want to work? The Social Security Administration has

WELCOME

150126 133431

RECENT POSTS

Profile: Catherine & Ralph – Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle Strength to Sexuality...Real Life Aging and Disability

Profile: Christy from Scottdale, PA

Bette Davis Quote

HEALTH

- The National Council on Aging offers a free, peer based workshop in local communities called the Chronic Disease Self Management Program (CDSMP) that is designed to help people control how their health affects their lives. (CLICK HERE TO FIND A WORKSHOP NEAR YOU).
- Learn about Advanced Directives from the National Institute on Aging. You can also download your state's advanced directive here.
- If you live in Arizona, California, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, or New Jeresy, visit db101.org to get tools and information on employment, health coverage, and benefits.

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Name

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RECENT POSTS

Profile: Catherine & Ralph – Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle

HOUSING OPTIONS & MODIFICATIONS

Housing Options

- Area Agencies on Aging are local informational centers on aging (and/or disability) related services and programming
- Centers for Independent Living are local informational centers on disability (and/or aging) related services and programming
- Aging and Disability Resource Centers are local informational centers on disability and aging related services and programming (*not found in all communities)

- National Association of Realtors: Seniors Real Estate Specialist
- Disability.gov website is a clearing house for disability information and lists housing resources
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
  - Knowing your rights: assistance animals; reasonable accommodations
  - File a housing discrimination complaint
  - Find a HUD approved housing counselor
  - Staying in your home
  - Finding an apartment
- National Association of the Deaf lists independent living & residential facilities for deaf seniors

Home Repair / Home Modifications

- AARP Home Fit Guide
- Do-Able Renewable Home Guide
- Easter Seals – Easy Access Home Guide
- Institute for Human Centered Design
- Low income home repair/home modifications
  - Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs)
  - Rebuilding Together
- National Association of Home Builders: Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists
- Lowe's Accessible Home
- The American Occupational Therapy Association
- National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modification
- * Some long-term care insurance policies cover some home modification. Check your policy for details.

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Bette Davis Quote

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CATEGORIES

Select Category ▾

Individual Pages Nested Under Resources, Legal

LEGAL

- The National Legal Resource Center has information and links to legal help for older adults and for advocates

- The National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys has a list of attorneys who help seniors with legal issues

- Legal Services Corporation Directory contains a nationwide directory of attorneys who help low-income older adults in civil (not criminal) matters

- The National Disability Rights Network has a directory of disability rights agencies nationwide

- The American Bar Association provides useful links to lawyer referral services and pro bono legal help for those with limited incomes

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- Fraud and Abuse: Department of Justice – Elder Justice Initiative

- Identity Theft: The Federal Trade Commission

- Consumer Protection for Seniors

- Federal Accessibility and Rights Enforcement Resources (including air travel, buildings and facilities, employment, housing, information technology, programs and services, telecommunication, transportation, and voting)

- Americans with Disabilities Act Technical Assistance

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Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle Strength to Sexuality…Real Life Aging and Disability

Profile: Christy from Scottdale, PA

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Individual Pages Nested Under Resources, Lifelong Learning

LIFELONG LEARNING

- Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

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RECENT POSTS

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Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle
Strength to Sexuality...Real

PERSONAL CARE ASSISTANCE & CAREGIVING

Local Information Centers

- Area Agencies on Aging are local informational centers on aging (and/or disability) related services and programming

- Centers for Independent Living are local informational centers on disability (and/or aging) related services and programming

- Aging and Disability Resource Centers are local informational centers on disability and aging related services and programming (*not found in all communities)

Online Information

- Eldercare Locator identifies local services

- Longtermcare.gov helps find services and calculate cost of care

- USA.gov lists resources for caregivers

- Medicaid: Long Term Services and Supports explains Medicaid coverage
- If you live in Arizona, California, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, or New Jeresy, visit db101.org to get tools and information on employment, health coverage

WELCOME

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Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle Strength to Sexuality...Real Life Aging and Disability

Profile: Christy from Scottdale, PA

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Individual Pages Nested Under Resources, Transportation

TRANSPORTATION

Local Information Centers for Transportation Services

- **Area Agencies on Aging** are local informational centers on aging (and/or disability) related services and programming

- **Centers for Independent Living** are local informational centers on disability (and/or aging) related services and programming

- **Aging and Disability Resource Centers** are local informational centers on disability and aging related services and programming (*not found in all communities)

Online Information

- **Transportation Options for Older Adults** brochure describes various types of transportation services for older adults

- **AARP's Getting Around** webpage

- **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration** brochure on Adapting Motor Vehicles for People with Disabilities

- Find a **Certified Driving Rehabilitation Specialist**

- **AAA's Senior Driving**

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APPENDIX E

DISABILITY GERONTOLOGY

DISABILITY GERONTOLOGY

I've developed the term *Disability Gerontology* to draw attention to aging with a disability. Despite the close connection between aging and disability, the field of **Gerontology** (the study of aging) has not traditionally considered the effects of a permanent disability over a lifetime. **Aging with a disability** (or chronic health condition) is a very common experience that deserves attention and respect.

Disability

Disability is a natural and diverse part of the human experience. It is not inherently negative. Disability is often used as a general term describing impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. In fact, people with disabilities are part of a cultural minority group. Removing physical and social barriers empower people with disabilities.

Many people experience living with a disability at some point within their lifetime – especially during older age. Additionally, individuals with lifelong disabilities are living into older age more than ever before thanks to medical and social progress during the 20th century.

Today, **over half of individuals aged 65 or older have a disability, and almost 37% of these individuals have a severe disability.** In fact, the population of individuals age 65 and over is projected to swell to 79.7 million in 2040 – representing a large mass of the total U.S. population with one in every five Americans expected to be elderly. The statistics are very clear. The fastest growing population is older Americans and a significantly large portion will live life with one or more disabilities.

Ageism & Ableism

Both aging and disability are historically thought of as negative and unattractive. This happens conscious and unconsciously. However, it is undeserved and very harmful to the wellbeing of individuals aging with disabilities.

Ageism is ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are biased against older individuals. Similar to ageism, *ableism* is a term used by disability studies scholars and advocates to describe prejudice and discrimination toward people with disabilities. The word is a product of the 1960's disability rights movement. Ableism judges people as less able, impaired, and/or needing 'fixing' – leading to all types of discrimination. It ignores the acceptance and accommodation of people with disabilities.

Both ageism and ableism have been individually studied. However, little attention has been given to the combined experience of ageism and ableism. **Ageism and ableism get in the way of positive aging for all individuals – regardless of age or ability.**

APPENDIX F

ABOUT

ABOUT

Evolving Abilities is a lifestyle blog promoting a positive and dynamic approach to aging with a disability or chronic health condition. It is written from the perspective of a disability gerontologist with experience, training, and expertise in aging in place, independent living philosophy, chronic disease self management, assistive technology, and positive aging. You can find a list of resources on related topics for information and support.

Mission: Evolving Abilities aims to be fun, educational, thought provoking, and resourceful blog for people aging with disabilities (or chronic health conditions) and their families.

The Author: Gerontologist Gina Semenza is a Master's of Science in Gerontology Candidate from California State University, Long Beach. Evolving Abilities grew out of her Directed Project, and is greatly shaped by her professional training in aging and personal insight as an individual living with a significant disability.

Gina is a consultant and a trained Aging in Place Specialist by the National Home Builders Association, holds an Executive Certificate in Home Modification from the University of Southern California, is a Certified Chronic Disease Self Management program facilitator, and is a nonprofit board member. She is also a member of Sigma Phi Omega, the National Gerontology Academic Honor and Professional Society, as well as the Gerontology Society of America and the American Society on Aging.

Gina is a power wheelchair user and lives with her wonderful husband and adorable baby daughter in California.

APPENDIX G

CONTACT

CONTACT

Feel free to share your story, ask a question, or send a suggestion!

Name

ginasemenza

Email (required)

How did you come across Evolving Abilities? (required)

Facebook or other social network ▾

Comment (required)

WELCOME

RECENT POSTS

Profile: Catherine & Ralph –
Caregivers with Disabilities

APPENDIX H

ABOUT YOU

ABOUT YOU

I'd love to know more about my readers to better serve their needs. Please take a few moments to tell me about yourself and your interests.

What online information are you most interested in?

- ☐ finding information/resources
- ☐ being inspired
- ☐ finding a community to relate to
- ☐ all of the above

Other: [   ]

[Vote]

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Profile: Catherine & Ralph – Caregivers with Disabilities

Fact of the Day

Profile: From Muscle Strength to Sexuality...Real Life Aging and Disability

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