

## The Rise of the Vintage Readers Book Club

Jimmie Holland, MD, Mindy Greenstein, PhD Christian J. Nelson, PhD

For the last few years, we have been running an Aging and Cancer Group at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, to help the fastest growing group of cancer survivors, i.e., the elderly, cope with the double whammy of aging and cancer. In some ways, these are two opposite problems: cancer crystallizes the fear of dying, while aging often crystallizes the fear of the opposite — growing older and more infirm as the years go by. One challenge both issues have in common, though, is the sense of isolation they can engender.

We have tried different approaches based on various psychological models, particularly the work of Erik and Joan Erikson on development throughout the life cycle. And we convened two “expert panels” of elders to help us pilot our ideas. Not surprisingly, when talk of theories and models of development came up, eyes routinely glazed over. And so we learned to keep theory out of it, and to stick to everyday life experiences.

Then, an amazing thing happened, based not on theory or research or any

kind of science, but, instead, on the love of a grandmother and granddaughter. My (JH) granddaughter and I decided to start a grandmother/granddaughter book club, to read and discuss the Harvard Classics during her gap year before college. We so enjoyed the exchange of ideas across the generations. But when college finally started and my young partner became too busy, she suggested I start a new book club for elders interested in tackling the great books of Western civilization. Which is exactly what I did.

The new club, which we integrated into the Aging and Cancer Group, was called the Vintage Readers Book Club. We devoted one meeting a month to discussing passages from the classics; keeping in mind the age of our readers, we selected texts from antiquity to the modern era, starting with writings by Benjamin Franklin and Cicero’s essay “On Old Age.”

If those choices sound dry to you, they were anything but. Whereas the regular group meetings averaged two to four members, the book club



Jimmie Holland, MD

meetings sometimes had close to a dozen. We could barely squeeze into the same room. Discussions were the most animated since the inception of the group. Clearly, the book club touched something very visceral for the members, who ranged in age from mid-sixties to mid-nineties.

So, what was it about the Vintage Readers Book Club that was so inspiring to its members? And why was it so much more popular than the aging group from which it sprung?

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### EDITORIAL STAFF

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### SUPPORT THE 65+ PROGRAM

If you would like to make a tax-deductible gift to support MSKCC’s 65+ Program, please call 646-888-3154.

### ABOUT THE 65+ PROGRAM

A diagnosis of cancer is difficult at any age, but older patients face unique challenges. Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center is committed to providing cancer patients aged 65 and older with the treatment and support they need. The 65+ Program offers the services of a multidisciplinary geriatric team, including physicians, clinical nurse specialists, social workers, nutritionists, pharmacists, and psychiatrists, as well as members of the Pain and Palliative Care Service and the Integrative Medicine Service. The programs and care provided focus on the unique needs of cancer patients aged 65 years and older.

If you would like more information about the 65+ Program or a referral to one of our team members, please call 646-888-4741.

We have some theories.

One is a cohort effect – people of a certain age aren't comfortable with talking about themselves in a therapeutic situation. There's a stigma to anything associated with psychiatry. But they can talk about books. Ironically, in talking about books, the conversations regularly come back to our own lives – what we think of what the author wrote, how it relates to our experiences in many ways, including but not limited to our experience of ourselves as aging and/or as dealing with cancer.

Which brings us to another possible reason. One of the ways we cope with aging and cancer is simply to live our lives the best we can. Having a concrete external goal — to discuss Ben Franklin's ideas of what makes us happy, for example — sounds a lot more fun than having the goal be a discussion of our problems. Even if both goals end up leading us to the same place!

Cicero's essay "On Old Age" was illuminating in another way, too. His description of ageism thousands of years ago could have popped out of today's *New York Times*. And what better way to feel connected to the world than to feel connected to the world across boundaries of time and culture.

*For anyone interested in joining the group:*

The Vintage Readers Book Club is for readers over 70 who are interested in reading the classics of the Western world. We meet once a month. Three weeks before each session, members receive large-font copies of the readings.

Anyone who is interested in joining us, whether for one session or for many, can call Dr. Holland at 646-888-0026, or Zaneta McMichael at 646-888-0124, ext. 124. Please share this with anyone over 70 who might like to join us.

### Lectures/Workshops 65+Program Upcoming Events

#### Tuesday, April 9, 2013 Cancer and Aging

**Speaker:**

Beatriz Korc-Grodzicki,  
MD, PhD  
Chief of the Geriatric Service,  
Department of Medicine

**When and Where:**

10:30 AM–12:00 noon  
Rockefeller Research Laboratories,  
Room 101  
430 East 67th  
(Between First and York Avenues)

#### Tuesday, May 14, 2013 "I Don't Need Help": Maintaining a Safe Home Environment

**Speaker:**

Joelle Lichtman, MA  
CAPS-Certified Aging-in-Place  
Specialist, LEED, AP BD+ C

**When and Where:**

10:30 AM–12:00 noon  
1275 York Avenue  
(at 68th Street), Room M107

#### Tuesday, June 11, 2013 Developing a Mature Spirituality

**Speakers:**

Melissa Stewart, LCSW-R

**When and Where:**

10:30 AM–12:00 noon  
1275 York Avenue  
(at 68th Street), Room M107

### Nurses Corner

Listed below are the posters to be presented by the geriatric resource nurses at upcoming meetings:

#### 16th Annual NICHE (Nurses Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders) Conference Forging New Paths and Partnerships

April 10–12, 2013, Philadelphia, PA

##### *Implementing a Program to Improve Sleep in Hospitalized Geriatric Patients in a Tertiary Cancer Center*

Susan A. Derby, MA, RN, GNP-BC, ACHPN, and Heidi Yulico, MS, RN, GNP-BC

#### Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) 38th Annual Congress

April 25–28, Washington, DC

##### *Implementation of the Geriatric Resource Nurse Program at a NICHE Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center*

Stephanie McEaney, MS, RN, GNP, ONS; Heidi Yulico, MS, RN, GNP-BC; Susan Derby, MA, RN, GNP-BC, ACHPN; and Patrice Mockler, RN



### Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

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