

The Defining Years!

Many define those over 50 years of age as being in our Golden Years, Oldies but Goodies, Baby Boomers, etc., etc. I have found hundreds of books on aging; How to do it well; What not to do; What not to wear; What not to say; How to say it best; How to break free; How to hold on; 50 things to do now that you are 50, 60 things to do now that you are 60... Oh my goodness, I believe everyone finds their revelation after 50 and most of them wrote a book about it. What's your story???

Who are you now that you have reached 50 plus? Are you the same person you were when you started your family? How about your first job? Or that wonderful walk down the aisle? I am sure you are not. Well I choose to believe that we have all grown and have learned so many valuable lessons from the journey we call life. Who defines us after we turn fifty? Or sixty? Or even seventy and eighty?

A very pretty lady came into the Central Area Senior Center, where I am the Director, today for a meeting. She signed her name in the register, looked up at me and said, "Oh gosh, I'm so embarrassed that I am now a "Senior" and had to check the 'over fifty' box." She shook her head looking sad and bewildered and I screamed "Heck Yes! Check that box Girlfriend, because You have finally arrived!" I said this with all of the excitement in the world and I meant it. I believe I somewhat startled her with my almost cheerleader-like attitude but I have discovered something so delightful about getting older, I could not wait to share it with her. "We are now part of the Club, the Exclusively Not So Exclusive Club that is growing every day. We finally get to do what we want to do! So be proud and enjoy it". She looked up at me and smiled straightened up her shoulders and said, "Really? Wow, I never thought of it like that. " I shared with her the many activities that we were planning for the 50plus Club, encouraged her to come hang out with us, yes, at the Central Area Senior Center, otherwise known as The Central. She smiled, took our information and went on her way.

Why am I so excited about this stage in my life? I turned fifty one this last February and I feel on top of the world! It's really a matter of the glass being half full or half empty. Last year when I turned fifty, I gave myself the biggest birthday party I've ever had. At first I thought it might be selfish, but then my children said, "Mom, it's time for you to do something for you since you have given so much to us and everyone else." So, I began to plan my party. I had just become a member of a wonderful women's organization called Seattle Chapter of Girlfriends Incorporated. Our motto is Friendship and Fun, so they were the first on my list. These women, most of them over fifty and many over sixty, are some of the most beautiful, well established African American women in Seattle. Each of them welcomed me with open arms into the so called "50plus Club" of which I didn't know existed. I think it's a secret until you are forty nine and a half! They didn't tell me much; they only said that I was in for the time of my

life. And that I was just getting started because sixty was much better than fifty. So I planned my party and had over one hundred and fifty guests usher me into this new Club. We danced all night and I welcomed fifty with open arms still not knowing what was ahead of me but I was still so excited. Did I mention I got a tattoo?

The following month (March) I had my biggest *AHA! Moment!* I attended the Aging in America Conference in Chicago. In one of the general sessions Dr. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, an African American professor from Harvard University spoke on her research which led to her book entitled, *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risks and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50*. I was amazed at her wonderful perspective on aging. In this book, she interviews forty people between the ages of 50 and 75. She defines this time as being the most passionate time in our lives. This is the time that the children are gone, and we can finally follow our dreams. Some quit their professions to begin their own business, pursued their artistic dreams and more. Goodness, when I heard her speak with such eloquence and conviction, I received such a revelation of where I was in my life I wanted to jump up and shout Hallelujah! But when I looked around, many were still taking notes and listening intently. I felt like I was in church, and I could have sworn I heard a choir singing.

“We must develop a compelling vision of later life, one that does not assume a trajectory of decline after fifty but recognizes this as a time of potential change, growth and a new learning time when our courage gives us hope. ~from The Third Chapter

A sense of adventure awaits us in these explorative and exciting years. I challenge everyone to try something new every year. I have made a commitment to do something adventurous, exciting and new every birthday. This year I decided to go on a hike, which I haven't done since I was a Girl Scout. My good friend, Marcee, is a hiker so when I told her I wanted to go hiking, she was all for it. Our original plans were to go to the Portland Jazz Festival and kick back. Well, once I set the hike out there, there was no turning back. We partied to Poncho Sanchez in four inch heels Friday night, but Saturday morning was a different story. She took me up to Multnomah Falls and said, “Are you ready?” I looked up at the falls and took a big gulp. The sign said 1.5 miles up with eleven switchbacks. Well, I could not turn back because we had stopped at Eddie Bauer and caught the biggest sale on hiking jackets, gloves and hats I'd ever seen. So, I was totally warm and very cute if I might say so myself. Needless to say, we headed up the mountain with my new green jacket and treaded shoes in the ice and snow. The farther we went up, the colder and icier it became. When we reached the third switchback, I was ready to turn back, but all I could think about was someone saying ‘you are too old to start hiking now!’ Well, shame on them because I kept going higher and higher. I slipped a few times, crawled up a couple of real icy patches, scooted down a few more and *hurray...* we made it to the top!

We celebrated and took photos of the icy waters rushing down the mountain. This was a huge accomplishment for me, because I am not an athletic or out-doors kind of girl. Well in all of our celebrating, I forgot for a minute that we had to go back down the mountain. Oh My Gosh! It was even more terrifying going down the mountain than it was going up the mountain. So, I hugged the inside of the mountain, slipped and slid, and in some parts even scooted a few feet down the mountain. And on the way, I met a wonderful woman who was 67 years old. She was one of the few who made it to the top that day. I was even more inspired, and when I go back in the spring, it will be a piece of cake. But most importantly, I was excited that I had done something new. What's next you ask? This summer I'm going to learn to ride a motorcycle and on my next birthday, I shall sky dive. No, this is not a bucket list... this is a Pick Up List. *Picking up my life and doing my own thang!* Oh, did I mention that I was sore from head to toe for the next three days? There are realities to adventure, but the memories last forever.

I am sharing these experiences because for so many years generations have allowed others to define how we are supposed to be, act and dress once in our older years. It is important to know who you are and what you are capable of accomplishing. As Dr. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot says set the vision for your future. Take time to define who you are in your Third Chapter. A pastor I know used to always say "If you let someone else *define* you, they will *confine* you." So don't allow anyone to put you in a box.

Our new 50plus Club is one of the largest groups on the planet. Our membership grows every day. We are one of the strongest, most diverse communities ever known to man. We not only have numbers, we have wisdom to go along with it. I encourage you to find your lane, explore your dreams and vision for the rest of your lives. As one of our friends put it, "*Being a Senior means Vintage, not worn out*".