

2021

Leading from the Middle

Edward F. Ansello

Virginia Commonwealth University, eansello@vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/vcoa_editorial



Part of the [Geriatrics Commons](#)

Copyright managed by Virginia Center on Aging.

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/vcoa_editorial/57

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Virginia Center on Aging at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Director's Editorials from Age in Action by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

From the Director, Virginia Center on Aging

By Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Leading from the Middle

How do you say goodbye in a thousand words after a career of more than 50 years?

This is my final editorial as Director of the Virginia Center on Aging (VCoA). After almost 32 years leading from the middle of a splendid group at the Virginia Center on Aging, I am retiring and moving on. These colleagues have been skilled professionals and friends who have made our work and its many accomplishments a true pleasure. I thank them and hope that they know of my gratitude.

The Virginia Center on Aging (VCoA) and I have been blessed with supportive leadership from those to whom we have reported over the years, starting with John Andrako, Vice President for Health Sciences (VPHS), who hired me in the fall of 1989; he was followed by VPs Jim McGovern, John E. Jones, Hermes Kontos, and Sheldon Retchin, and then by Cecil Drain, the Dean of the College of Health Professions, who retired in 2019. They have known and encouraged us.

One of the first things that Bill Egelhoff, my predecessor as Director of VCoA, did when I arrived was to take me to the General Assembly during the 1990 Session and introduce me to its leadership, office by office, for he knew everyone. I especially remember meeting for the first time Senators Hunter Andrews and Benny Lambert, and Delegates Tom Moss and Frank Hall; Frank would soon be my closest friend in the General Assembly, mentoring me and our Center the rest of his life.

We are slabs of marble that are hewn and chiseled by interactions with others. The finished product varies wildly.

My mother, who lived until a week before her 94th birthday, worked until her late eighties, the last 30 years as a medical secretary and then adding skills as an assistant to a dermatologist; my father worked two full-time jobs simultaneously as truck driver and bus driver from my childhood through adolescence.

I guess their lives influenced holding my first real job in my 7th and 8th grades, delivering newspapers before and after school and on the weekends. This was the golden age for newspapers in Boston, and I delivered the *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald* in the mornings, the *Boston Traveller* and *Record American* in the afternoons, plus these and the *Post* and *Christian Science Monitor* on Sundays.

Work full-time or close to it filled my life from high school through graduate school, with many fascinating experiences, such as working as cashier and clerk at a grocery store; having the up-to-closing shift at a hamburger joint; digging latrines in the winter at a Boy Scout camp; working summers for a painting company that had the contracts to spruce up dormitories at Harvard, Jackson, MIT, and several smaller colleges; delivering beer for Anheuser Busch across Boston; serving as the one-man crew on a luxury motor yacht; delivering or sorting mail for six years as a postal service Christmas temp; babysitting the new geology department computer in graduate school when it took up an entire room; and so much more. These all instilled a respect for honest work and conditioned my expectations of co-workers.

So, I was especially pleased to encounter good people who became valued partners in my years at the Center on Aging at the University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) and then here at the Virginia Center on Aging at Virginia Commonwealth University.

At Maryland, I was part of a small team that wrote the proposal to the Administration on Aging for grant funding to launch the Center on Aging at UMCP in 1974. Our Center became the hub of a gerontology certificate program that reached to four campuses and aging-related course offerings in over 30 departments. In the early 1980s, we recruited Jim and Jean Zink to our Center staff. She had contracted polio as a teenager, overcame it with the true grit of a survivor, but over our many years together experienced the boomerang of post-polio syndrome

and progressive deterioration. Throughout years of our offering training programs on aging with lifelong disabilities for agency staffs, when there was no ADA access for her wheelchair, she showed that gritty determination, with an infectious enthusiasm, and a quiet, trenchant sense of humor. Remembering her has reinforced my dedication to focus on the problems and opportunities that accompany growing older with lifelong disabilities.

At the same time, my Maryland colleague Dr. Peter Lamy, winner of the Remington Honor Medal, one of pharmacy's highest recognitions, showed me the meaning of commitment. Over the course of multiple years of our geropharmacy projects funded by the AARP Andrus Foundation, we'd drive hours to rural communities where we'd start training for local pharmacists late at night, after they'd closed their stores so they wouldn't lose any business.

At VCU, Bill Egelhoff and the VCoA staff welcomed me and we expanded our work across Virginia. Teams and partnerships continued to be the *modus operandi*. I was honored to collaborate with valued colleagues in initiatives on pre-retirement planning, lifelong learning, widowed persons services, lifelong disabilities, geriatrics curriculum development, elder abuse, caregiving among minority populations, and more. Together, we were able to accomplish so much with our small VCoA staff.

Over the course of my career, besides co-founding the Maryland Consortium for Gerontology in Higher Education, the Committee on Humanities and the Arts in the Gerontological Society of America, the Virginia Coalition for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, the Senior Center of Richmond at Chesterfield, the Area Planning and Services Committee on Aging with Lifelong Disabilities, and the Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield, I was privileged to be Project Director (PD), Principal Investigator (PI), Co-PD, or Co-PI on more than 45 externally funded grant projects. In each of these initiatives, the work was collaborative, interdisciplinary or interprofessional. I was so pleased to be enmeshed with and surrounded by enthusiastic individuals, to learn from them, and to care about them.

Leading from the middle means that establishing a

culture of equity, irrespective of each person's job title or degree, was and is fundamental. Fostering mutual respect was and is the natural heart of leading from the middle; expecting reciprocity of respect and the best of team members is not paternalism or maternalism but the organic outcome.

The Virginia Geriatric Education Center (VGEC) which I direct is but the most current example of true interprofessional partnerships where esteemed colleagues on its Plenary management team have taught me so much more about aging-related issues than I could ever reciprocate. As importantly, their support and that of our talented and giving VCoA staff and our VCoA Advisory Committee have showed me what it means to commit oneself to service. Together, the VCoA staff, Advisory Committee, and VGEC Plenary total over 60 caring individuals. Without naming each, I hope that they know how grateful I am for having known them.

At the same time, I must acknowledge the abiding friendships over the years with Paul Raia, Rick Moody, Harvey Sterns, Bob Schneider, Eli Cohen, and Peter Lamy that have meant so much to me, and valued colleagues Bernice Neugarten, Bob Butler, MaryEllen Cox, Tom Barker, Len Hayflick, Benny Lambert, Frank Hall, and Bill Egelhoff who encouraged me.

COVID stopped the shared lunch times at work where all of us at VCoA would gather to share stories and updates; in retrospect, this daily routine of the past 15 years or so was something essential to our working family. They were never subordinates or "direct reports" to me; they have always been friends and colleagues and I was honored to lead from the middle, surrounded by their talents. I will miss them and our VGEC colleagues.

Panta rhei (everything flows on).

Finally, I'm reminded of a comment by Wilfred Grenfell, a physician and medical missionary to Newfoundland and Labrador over 100 years ago who founded local hospitals for small and isolated communities: "The service we render to others is really the rent we pay for our room on the earth."