



What is it that everyone wants to do and no one wants to do?

You know the answer. What everyone wants and no one wants is to grow old. We try to avoid dying, or at least dying young, but growing old scares us. Our fears go beyond worry about our losing our health and abilities. We are afraid of our fate in an ageist society.

We've all heard of ageism, at least in the abstract. During COVID-19, we have seen its ugly truths first-hand in the appalling ways some seniors have lived and died. Were these truths new? No. Were they noticed? Also no, or at least not enough. We welcome improvements, but we can't ignore the many reasons we need them. Some are economic, but economics comes down to choices, and choices expose values. If we finally recognize that racism is unacceptable, why do we accept ageism? As long as we do, all our efforts at reform will fail.

Let's look at some facts from Ontario's Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

- Seniors are the fastest-growing demographic in Ontario.
- Ontario has the most culturally diverse seniors' population in Canada and is home to more than half (53%) of Canada's immigrant seniors.
- Most seniors in Ontario want to age at home and in their community.
- A variety of factors – for example, gender, ethnicity, health, education, and financial security – affect seniors' experience of ageing.
- 28% of seniors in Ontario, aged 65-69, are employed.
- 30% are at risk of becoming socially isolated.

Now let's look beyond those facts and hear from seniors.



Letter from a senior
Part 1: Am I invisible?

Dear fellow Torontonians, Ontarians, Canadians:

You don't know me. You don't see me.

You don't know me. You don't see me. But I'm your neighbour, friend, partner, mother, grandmother.

You don't know me. You don't see me. But I sit beside you on the subway, drive behind you on the road, walk opposite you on the street, eat across from you in the corner diner, and wait along with you at the doctor's office.

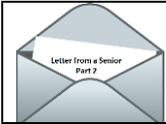
You don't know me. You don't see me. But I have voted for over five decades to make sure there are responsible leaders, efficient governments, and equitable policies in your city, province, and country.

You don't know me. You don't see me. But I have worked for years advocating for you, your families, your friends. I have marched in the streets so that you will have a fair society.

You don't know me. You don't see me. But I have written letters to newspapers, politicians, governments to plead for more fairness, equity, security. I have spent countless hours writing reports, holding consultations, and developing policies so you will have publicly funded health care, social insurance programs, and more day care spaces.

You don't know me. You don't see me. But thousands of my generation have been sick and dying recently in nursing homes, retirement homes, and private homes across the country - because you don't care enough to know us, to see us.

- Fern



Letter from a senior Part 2: What don't you see?

I am not going to report on stats or studies, just facts and a different perspective.

My friends and I are considered elderly. What difference does that make? I might be a little grayer, but my mind is still with it. I volunteer and work as many hours, if not more, than a full time-employee. When I'm contributing, no one seems to realize my age. But in a mixed group of various ages, especially people 20-40 years old, I am now considered old. I should not have an opinion. My knowledge and experience are passé. I am useless.

This is how many people view seniors. Younger people treat us as invisible. They push in line in front of us. They call us names. They look at us as pariahs. They blame us for using the medical system. They blame us for having the nerve to receive benefits; after all, we are no longer working, at least not for pay.

What don't they see? Vibrant, smart, experienced people who think, love, do good in this world, travel, help the economy, and give others a shoulder to cry on. We worked for 40-50 years paying taxes, raising families, developing new products, advancing science and medicine; we fought for human rights; we respected others. We have lived through the first televisions, the first computers, polio scares and vaccines, wars, international crises, race riots of the 1960s, space travel, and speeches that will always be remembered – John Kennedy and Martin Luther King. More are going to university than in any other time in history. Yet we have to remind our politicians that we exist.

Our long-term care homes are disgraceful. PSWs are underpaid. Too many elderly residents believe they are in a waiting room for death. Those living in place are often forgotten unless someone – a neighbour or superintendent – knows they are vulnerable. Some face abuse, scams, and frauds. Some are weak or have mobility problems and live in poverty, often not getting the nutrition and assistance they need. Rising costs are ignored. Seniors who live on pensions only are doing without. Our government is ignoring them.

Many seniors die alone, they break bones, and in many cases, their bodies are not found for weeks. The reason – no one cared enough to check on them. The holidays are lonely, no one cares. Families are too busy. You can see the sadness in their eyes, as other senior tenants are taken out by family members.

Agencies think they are meeting their commitment, that they even excel, if once a month they give low-income housing tenants a three-dollar meal. They do not take into account health restrictions or cultural differences. The seniors look at this generosity as garbage, and most meals end up in garbage cans.

COVID has opened our eyes to a disgrace. All the studies in the world won't compensate for the loneliness, isolation, and health issues seniors face. We need to step up. Politicians, medical people, and community members must look at the real issues. Teachers and parents have to bring respect back into the picture. Agencies have to stop looking at seniors as a number they can use for their grants. A whole mindset must change. Everyone knows a problem exists, but very few people want to act. We must stand up for the injustices. We must speak for those who are afraid, or too weak or ill, to do so. We must continue the fight for equality and equity for those who need and deserve it.

- Anita



Letter from a senior Part 3: What won't you admit?

Assessing the effects of ageism – from a position of privilege

I write this in this midst of a very visible pandemic (COVID-19), police violence that exposes yet again the racism that riddles our society, but often lies below the surface, and the deaths of frail elderly persons that reveal long time problems in the long-term care system. These events affect Canadians in very different ways – some hardly at all, but others fatally.

I enter the stage of this drama as an ageing white woman. That social location means that I am educated, have had a career with many leadership roles, enjoy a good income, and am used to being heard and respected. My fear is that one of my characteristics is becoming dominant, whether I like it or not. Grey hair and an ageing female body are a lethal mix in Canadian society. I know I will experience discrimination, I expect it, I am also becoming increasingly sensitive to it. That phone call that was not returned – am I being ignored? I stare at people on the subway but mostly they do not see me. I look in the mirror and I see my mother. Funny – when I turn around she disappears – happens every time!

That ageist stereotypes shape my daily life I do not question. What I do question is how to respond. I know I have to figure this out; deciding each time is taxing my decreasing energy resources. Oh, I often fall back on – “Ignore it; life is too short!” This may work as a short-term survival strategy, but it strangles long-term thriving.

The decades long mistreatment of people my age in long-term care facilities, when they cannot fight for themselves, is ageism on the ground. What is happening can be ignored because there is no public protest from those oppressed – the old and sick. Budget priorities reveal the ranking of institutions and the people involved. At the bottom of the ladder are frail elderly persons (primarily women), next up are personal support workers (primarily low paid women of colour). We cannot fix the system until we recognize the ageism that allows it to exist and be reproduced. It will continue unless this dynamic is explicitly part of the analysis and undergirds solutions.

So.... again, what to do? One thing is certain - I never want to go into a long-term care home, precisely because I do know what life will be like there. Change will not happen because ageism will not be addressed in reforms. Good intentions are not enough. Thus, of the limited options available to me, I choose to age and die in the community surrounded by friends who understand the structural underpinnings of ageism.

- Sheila

What can you do?

- **Start with yourself.** Take nothing for granted. What assumptions do you make simply because of someone's age? What assumptions do *you* make about *yourself*, because of *your* age?
- **Question others.** What assumptions are they making? Don't ignore them. Call them on it.
- **Watch your language.** Stay away from demeaning terms. Don't refer to someone as “mom” or “grandma” unless you are talking about your mother or grandmother. Is an “old lady” really just an old lady?
- **Treat each person as an individual.** Notice them and listen to them.
- **Acknowledge the problems.** Act whenever and wherever you can.
- **Watch how you and the people you know treat seniors.** When it isn't right, speak up and say it isn't right.
- **When you have an opportunity, communicate** – to newspapers, politicians, decision makers.