



Live Fully; Retire at 85

Laura Carstensen '78, the founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, says an aging population brings opportunities to society as well as challenges.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

THE INTIMATIONS OF doom are hard to miss. Pick up a paper or browse a blog, and somewhere is the discussion of the economic cataclysm that will hit us when the baby boomers grow old.

Aging boomers will drain the nation's resources. Fewer workers will toil harder, supporting a ballooning population of retirees.

According to psychologist **Laura Carstensen** '78, such fears might be borne out—or not—depending on our collective

▲ **NEW ATTITUDE:** The aging of the American population can be good news for society, says Carstensen.

willingness to reconstruct our concept of life after 65.

“Throughout most of human history, aging has been related to death,” she says. But in an age of “super-sized lives,” she adds, “we need to build channels for older people to be engaged in society.”

Carstensen is a professor of psychology, the Fairleigh S. Dickinson Jr. Professor of Public Policy, and the founding director of the Center on Longevity at Stanford University. We are in the midst of a demographic revolution, she writes in her new book, *A Long Bright Future* (Random House, 2009). For most of human history, the majority of people did not live much beyond their reproductive years. Then, “in the blink of an eye, in evolutionary terms,” she writes, life

expectancy soared in developed nations such as the United States. The implications are enormous, she argues, and it's time to look beyond the advantages to each individual and find ways for an aging population to work for everyone's benefit.

Carstensen grew up in Rochester, where her father, Ed Carstensen, taught engineering and is now a professor emeritus in the electrical and computer engineering department.

When she was 18, she was injured in a car accident and spent four months recovering in Strong Memorial Hospital. She shared a room with three older women.

“I watched the way that I was being treated versus the older women,” she says. Nurses and hospital staff expected much

less of the older women than they did of her, she recalls.

That's when she became interested in aging, and in "how much is biological, and how much our perceptions are culturally induced."

Having taught psychology and conducted empirical research for over 20 years, Carstensen spearheaded the Center on Longevity in 2006 to bring together experts from science, medicine, social science, and public policy to explore ways to help society adapt to a rapidly aging population. Part of that adaptation means finding ways to help people age better. Carstensen stresses that aging is an inevitable biological process. And while Americans are living longer and healthier lives in the aggregate, a substantial sector of the population—a less affluent and less educated sector—is not.


Duncan Moore '74 (PhD), the Rudolf and Hilda Kingslake Professor of Optical Engineering and vice provost for entrepreneurship at Rochester, was invited by Carstensen to Stanford in 2005 to help plan the interdisciplinary center. Moore brought his expertise in medical optics and related technologies.

"The center is about much more than science and technology," he notes. "Laura has a much broader context for looking at this, a very clear vision about everything that is involved in the issue of aging."

That vision includes substantial changes to public policy and cultural attitudes. Carstensen points to research showing that an increasing number of adults in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s, are able-bodied, healthy, content, and have personal and occupational skills that are valuable in the workplace and in society as a whole. Without specific health problems, she says, there's no reason for people to stop working at 65.

Many Americans don't welcome the idea of working into their 70s and 80s. But Carstensen suggests a new approach to work throughout our lives, working less frantically in earlier adulthood and for a longer span of time.

"I believe in a four-day week and sabbaticals, and not just for faculty," she says, adding that people can work at not just one, but two, or even three careers over the course of their lives.

A baby boomer herself, Carstensen is eager to see her generation rise to the occasion. "Now we're the older people we said we'd never trust, but we still have the chance to pull off a social revolution." 

EXCERPT

'A Story about Long Life'

By Laura Carstensen '78

A few years ago, I was a guest on the *Today* show, presenting some findings from my research team suggesting that older people experience fewer negative emotions than younger people do in day-to-day life. When I arrived at the studio, the producer warned me that Matt Lauer, who was to interview me, was skeptical about these findings. Throughout the interview, he made his doubts clear. He was incredulous when I said that the majority of older people are not lonely or depressed. To me, the oddest part was that his interview with me was sandwiched between a report on the death, at age eighty-four, of legendary publisher Katharine Graham and an interview with Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric and arguably the most successful businessman in United States history. After the cameras turned away—and Lauer persisted in telling me that I couldn't be right—I pointed out to him that Katharine Graham and Jack Welch were technically "old people." He looked at me as if I'd just insulted two of his favorite friends.

But the fact is, research shows over and over that most older people are happier than the 20-somethings who are assumed to be in the prime of life. People over the age of 65 are the most mentally stable and optimistic adults. They have the lowest rates of depression. Most older people are relatively happy, they're active, and they live quite successfully on their own, not in nursing homes. Older people focus more on positive images and messages in everyday life than younger people, they resolve interpersonal problems more effectively, and they regulate their emotions better than any other age group. Their social spheres may have contracted and their interest in brand-new adventures lessened, but they put a high priority on emotionally satisfying experiences. On the whole they are not seeking to widen their social circles, yet they treasure the time they spend with

people they love. Some researchers dub this the "paradox of aging," that a group that is collectively losing its physical stamina, youthful attractiveness, and opportunities for economic growth is, somehow, happier.

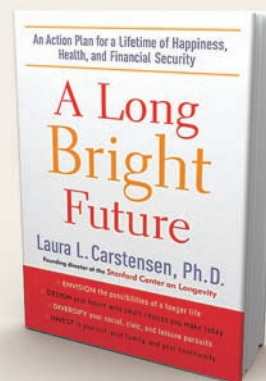
Admittedly, there are problems associated with aging as we know it—an overly romanticized picture of aging in America does as much harm as an overly negative one. Age-related diseases lower the quality of life for hundreds of thousands of older people and their families, and Social Security and Medicare are facing real financial trouble. Yet the ballooning of life expectancy is occurring just as science and technology are on the cusp of

solving many of the practical problems of aging. Imagine this: What if we could not only have lots of added years, but spend them being physically fit, mentally sharp, functionally independent, and financially secure? At that point, we no longer have a story about old age. We have a story about long life.

This story is ours to write. Life stages are social constructions, not absolute realities. The economic institutions and cultural scripts that guide us through life—that tell us when to get an education, when to marry and have children, and when to retire—were designed for lives roughly half as long as the ones most people live today. We have the opportunity to rethink life's stages in profoundly novel ways.

What does it mean to live for nearly a century? What is old age for? Where should the extra years go? In a popular joke, an old man sighs, "No one told me all the extra years come at the end."

Well, they don't have to. We could insert them anywhere.



This essay is adapted from A Long Bright Future: An Action Plan for a Lifetime of Happiness, Health, and Financial Security, published by Broadway Books, a division of Random House Inc. © 2009 by Laura L. Carstensen. Reprinted with permission.