Successful Aging: Movies are growing up too

By HELEN DENNIS | helendenn@aol.com |
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Is it my imagination or am I seeing Hollywood finally featuring older people as stars with something to offer rather than appearing weak, silly and needy? If I am right, it’s about time! Thanks for your take on this.

— N.S.

A Dear N.S.,

Hope springs eternal and part of that hope is linked to demography. The baby boomers are getting older and are between 51 and 69 years. They are 78 million strong, which translates into a lot of discretionary income and buying power. Many of us in that stage of life and older would like to see a balance between the challenges facing older persons and the portrayal of older adults that inspire us.

The late David Wolfe, author of the classic book “Serving the Ageless Market” (McGraw-Hill, 1990) wrote about effective marketing strategies to reach older adults. One strategy is to provide images and experiences to which older adults would aspire. That logic transfers to movies.

AARP identifies movies for grown-ups that feature older actors and actresses as well as themes that an experienced generation would enjoy and appreciate. Two recently released movies on their list highlight the possibilities, roles and capacities of older people. (Note this column is not a movie review; rather it is a focus on the message.)

The first movie is “A Walk in the Woods” starring 79-year-old Robert Redford and 74-year-old Nick Nolte. It is based on travel writer-humorist Bill Bryson’s memoir of walking the Appalachian Trail.

Redford plays the role an older man who has had a semi-successful career, a good family life yet finds something missing to the point of having a meltdown. It’s a movie about age, time left, friendship and taking on a challenge to find out “what’s next?”

This question is germane to our off-screen lives and stimulates thinking to find answers to the “what’s next” question.

What can I do that brings meaning to my life? What are my physical and mental capabilities? Can I do more than I think I can do? Am I willing to take some risks? To what extent are social expectations and stereotyped images of aging dictating what I do? Answers to these questions require some personal reflection and an awareness of opportunities around us.
The second film is “The Intern,” starring Robert DeNiro and Anne Hathaway. DeNiro plays a 70-year old widower who is a retired phone book company executive. To get himself out of the house he volunteers as an intern to Hathaway’s company. She plays a 30-something CEO of an online fashion start up.

DeNiro is quoted in the AARP Magazine as saying, “I liked the idea of a movie (that) puts across the value of elder wisdom.” To add to this idea, a recent advertisement for the movie on a highway billboard reads: “Experience never gets old.”

A real life example that exemplifies DeNiro’s comment and the billboard message is the Encore Fellowship program. The program is part of Encore.org, a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco. Encore Fellowships are structured programs that match skilled, experienced professionals at the end of their mid-life careers with social purpose organizations.

Fellows help nonprofits build capacity, grow strategically and have a broader impact on their communities. Fellows receive a stipend with program costs shared by host organizations and program sponsors. In Los Angeles, Social Venture Partners operates the program. For more information, contact Judy Bamberger, Encore Fellows Program Manager at 818-807-3516 or email judy.bamberger@svpla.org. Opportunities are available for Encore Fellow candidates and nonprofit hosts.


Movies symbolize our most enduring values and secret desires. They encourage us to rethink contemporary ideas. In these two films we are inspired to rethink society’s view of older people and the responsibilities and possibilities to fulfill our personal “what’s next.”

N.S., Thank you for your good question. And yes, Hollywood seems to be catching up to the realities of age and what mature audiences value.

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Helen Dennis is a nationally recognized leader on issues of aging, employment and retirement with academic, corporate and nonprofit experience. She has received awards for her university teaching at USC's Davis School, Andrus Gerontology Center and for her contributions to the field of aging, the community and literary arts. She has edited two books and written more than 100 articles and has frequent speaking engagements. She is the weekly columnist on Successful Aging for the Southern California Newspaper Group, and has assisted more than 15,000 employees in preparation for the non-financial aspects of retirement. In her volunteer life, she has served as president of five nonprofit organizations. Fully engaged in the field of aging, she was a delegate to a White House Conference on Aging and is co-author of the Los Angeles Times bestseller, "Project Renewment®: The First Retirement Model for Career Women." Helen has extensive experience with the media including Prime Time, NPR, network news, the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Sacramento Bee and Christian Science Monitor. She recently has been recognized by PBS Next Avenue as one of the 50 influencers in aging for 2016. For more information, visit www.HelenMDennis.com. Or, follow her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/SuccessfulAgingCommunity.

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