



Welcome to Boomerhood

Looking to exercise body and mind and leave a positive mark on society, retiring baby boomers are shunning gated communities for vibrant cities and towns

David Demko pedals his bicycle down a beachside pathway between residential neighborhoods in Miami and Boca Raton, Fla. When the 61-year-old gerontologist finally takes a breather and sits to talk about his generation, he smiles and says there are two terms that fellow baby boomers dread having applied to them: senior citizen and elderly American.

It's easy to lump boomers in those categories, but it needlessly divides the fast-growing group of retirees from the rest of society, says Demko. "We want to remove the barriers, and along with them, the needless stigma attached to growing older," he explains.

More than 75 million in number, U.S. baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, redefined how Americans approached their working years. Now, Demko is at the forefront of what he calls the Zoomer movement, which aims to redefine how people in their fifties and beyond visualize retirement, work, lifespan, and meaning.

"The Zoomer culture isn't about denying that we're entering the second half-century of life, it's about viewing this period as a rich opportunity for personal growth," says Demko, author of *Zoomer Boomer: Stop Acting Your Age, Start Living Your Life*. "It's a second chance to achieve fulfillment in ways you didn't earlier, to reinvent the prime of life."

To that end, a recent study on the mindset of boomers by the Natural Marketing Institute (nmisolutions.com) found that 77 percent of women in the category and 68 percent of men believe the best years of their life are still ahead, and 61 percent of men and 53 percent of women aspire to live to age 100. A Wharton study shows a 65-year-old today has a one in four chance of reaching age 92. And according to Demko, 80 percent of life expectancy is determined by lifestyle factors - the two most important being where and how one chooses to live.

That last fact, observers say, has given rise to "boomerhoods" — places that cater to the millions who don't want to slow down and fade away, but wish to remain engaged in their communities. "Just like other generations, baby boomers are looking for an array of different features — the ability to have an active lifestyle, access to great amenities such as restaurants, theater, arts, sporting events, and health care, or the opportunity to be connected to their families," says Richard Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto and the author of *The Flight of the Creative Class*.

Authenticity, Florida adds, plays an overarching role in the success of boomerhoods: "Creative people — young and older alike — are selecting communities that have all the elements of a completely authentic community."

Beyond Gated Communities

For decades, one cliché of communal retirement has been the winter migration of "snowbirds" from northern states to active adult communities in the Sun Belt, which stretches from Florida to California. Many have predicted a similar mass flight as the boomers retire, but demographers now say the majority of newly minted sexagenarians and empty-nesters will likely stay closer to home, albeit in downsized living quarters.

For boomers who desire a change of scenery, many want more than endless time for golf and tennis behind the walls of a gated community. They're looking for places where they can continue to exercise their minds as well as their bodies through learning. And many whose retirement accounts have been hard hit by the economic downturn still plan to make valuable contributions to the local workforce. In fact, in a recent study of boomers by Merrill Lynch, 75 percent of respondents said they intend to keep working in retirement, though not in the same type of job. Their motivation often transcends the need for income; it stems from the desire to do something meaningful and different.

Experts who study and analyze baby boomer trends say many boomers prefer living and working in active communities, with a range of ages, rather than the retirement communities embraced by their predecessors. "Different generations have diverse perspectives on retirement — even within generations the perspective varies greatly," says Florida, whose Web site, CreativeClass.com, identifies places where boomers are already weaving themselves into the social fabric. "As a workforce, boomers grew up working all the time and focusing on the next advancement opportunity. This produced a very work-minded generation. I believe this will have a significant impact on how our generation views retirement."

Drawn to Big Cities

Of course, there are always the higher-end retirement communities that come fully loaded with amenities for active boomers, such as Spring Island (springisland-sc.com) on the South Carolina coast. Spring Island offers lots ranging from \$195,000 to \$1.5 million and a selection of dwellings from \$395,000 to \$5.5 million. Residents have access to tennis and fitness facilities, an Arnold Palmer signature golf course, equestrian trails, and endless nearby options for fishing, hunting, and boating.



But only about 15 percent of boomers have the desire and the means to live in such a paradise, Demko says. More and more, boomers are shunning traditional retirement communities and moving to revitalized sections of major cities, not only places like Boston, Chicago, Seattle, Atlanta, Denver, and Minneapolis, but also more unexpected spots like Cleveland, Birmingham, Ala., Trenton, N.J., and Detroit. In some of these cities' boomerhoods, Demko says, waves of residents with AARP cards are remodeling homes to make them more navigable, creating apartments to rent to young people for extra cash, or carving out spaces for their single, divorced, or unemployed children to inhabit.

There's also a movement among universities to attract retirees to cities and towns near college campuses. An advantage for boomers is access to college classes, fitness, and entertainment facilities, and even the chance to interact with retired faculty in the neighborhood. Campus Continuum, a Brookline, Mass., company that consults with developers and academic institutions on planning, marketing, and operating university-branded active adult communities for the 55-plus market, offers on its Web site (campuscontinuum.com) a list of colleges across the United States that are setting out the welcome mat for boomers. The firm's

A Journey, Not a Destination

Boomers don't necessarily need to rush to decide where to retire, say Demko and Florida. Some boomerhoods, in fact, are being created from within, by the residents who already inhabit them. As the generation known for pioneering trends that became part of the American consciousness — from stadium rock concerts and aerobic workouts to shopping malls and fast food — boomers have a talent for reinvention. Self-preservation is a powerful motivating factor.

Indeed, the Natural Marketing Institute study found that 81 percent of boomer women and 78 percent of boomer men cite health, and the need to maintain it by living an active life, as a priority. Experts say it's not only the physical trappings of boomerhoods that matter, but also changing attitudes about diet and exercise.

"I realize that not every boomer desires to depart from the way their parents and grandparents lived out their remaining years," Demko says. "That's OK. But when I go, I want it to be with my [hiking] boots still on. The best year is not the one behind or ahead. It can be the one you're in."

— *Todd Wilkinson*

Online Resources

David Demko, who coined the term Zoomer, says many baby boomers are under the false impression that if they've lived a less than fit life, there is little they can do at this point to change the course of their health. He recommends the following Web sites for boomers who want to become more active:

- * Health.nih.gov. To get started in assessing your health and making positive changes.
- * USDA.gov. Learn to eat for optimum nutrition.
- * AARP.org. Find other boomers looking for communities where those over 50 play active roles.
- * SelfGrowth.com. Advice on how to make personal growth a reality.

To order a copy of Demko's book, *Zoomer Boomer: Stop Acting Your Age, Start Living Your Life*, visit demko.com.

— T. W.

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