Challenging ‘Acceptable’ Prejudice at Walk with Me 2018

Written by Kristian Partington

Several aspects of *Walk with Me: Changing the Culture of Aging in Canada* set it apart from other age-focused conferences, including the event’s commitment to diversity. Older adults, long-term care residents, their loved ones and care partners share tables with policy-makers, researchers, educators and the health care professionals directly involved in the daily support of so many older adults.

This diversity was on full display in the afternoon of Day 1 at the 2018 conference in Niagara Falls, when a panel of thought leaders tackled questions related to a type of prejudice that somehow remains acceptable in the eyes of so many in society: ageism. Moderated by Dr. Jennifer Carson, a well-known leader in the field of culture change, *Stigma, Stereotypes and Segregation: The Need for a Revolution in Aging* brought together Saskatoon’s Suellen Beatty, CEO of Sherbrooke Community Society and a regional coordinator with the Eden Alternative®; Phyllis Fehr, a board member with Dementia Alliance International who is living in the early stages of dementia; David Kent, Vice President of the Ontario Association of Residents’ Councils; and Dr. Allen Power, author, speaker and Schlegel Chair in Aging and Dementia Innovation with the RIA.

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Moderated by Dr. Jennifer Carson, a well-known leader in the field of culture change, Stigma, Stereotypes and Segregation: The Need for a Revolution in Aging brought Saskatoon’s Suellen Beatty, CEO of Sherbrooke Community Society and a regional coordinator with the Eden Alternative®; Phyllis Fehr, a board member with Dementia Alliance International who is living in the early stages of dementia; David Kent, Vice President of the Ontario Association of Residents’ Councils; and Dr. Allen Power, author, speaker and Schlegel Chair in Aging and Dementia Innovation with the RIA.

“Ageism creates a negative reality of aging,” Jennifer said, prefacing the questions she would ask of the panel, “as it influences public policy, employment practices, standards of health care and how people are treated in society. But what’s worse is that we internalize it and the result limits our own choices about how we live and age.”

When Jennifer asked the panelists to describe an example of ageism they’ve witnessed or experienced, Phyllis spoke from the heart about the day she received her diagnosis and the instant prejudice against dementia she experienced. She was 48-years-old when she saw a gerontologist about her changing brain. She awaited the doctor’s assessment with her husband by her side. When the doctor returned, “not once did she look at me,” Phyllis recalled. “Not once did she talk to me. She looked right at my husband and said ‘your wife has dementia but she seems to be doing well so bring her back when she can no longer dress herself.’ ”

In the eyes of this physician, Phyllis was now a diagnosis. At every step, Phyllis challenges these stereotypes and advocates for her right to live life on her own terms. She’s an avid archer, for example, and she’ll have to fight for her right to practice her beloved hobby because society deems it unsafe for a person like her to handle a bow.

Countering this deep-rooted ageism begins with youth, David offered the audience, sharing the example of how his home partners with a local high school to offer education within a long-term care setting.

“The students see a home, not an institution,” David explained. “It’s a place with warm surroundings to it and . . . they hear from real people who lived their lives through the depression, and the message to them was ‘count every day and make it important.’ ” Engaging younger generations in long-term care settings helps to challenge their negative perceptions and allows them to witness the joys of later life.

As more and more individuals are challenged to see aging differently, we can begin to tackle ageist thinking and ageist actions. By bringing people together to learn with and from each other, as Walk with Me does, we can bring profile to this social movement and change the way we age in Canada.