

Senior/Volunteers for Childhood Immunization (SVCI) program inspires "senior reengagement"

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Historically, aging studies focused upon how senior citizens "do" and "should" disengage from society as they age, and it was true that many people did disengage from life as they retired from the world of work. From the 1960's onward gerontologists struggled to alter their initial view of retirement. They noted that many seniors were very active in retirement (activity theory), and that many merely did what they did in earlier years (continuity theory). As life expectancy was increasing each year in industrial societies and people were also retiring earlier, we began to realize that many might have as many years of retirement as years working. The idea of disengagement in old age began to seem more problematic as we became more concerned with the "meaning" of up to some thirty years of life.

With some 4.5 billion of the world's 6 billion population living in poverty for \$2-\$3 dollars or less a day, a sensitive or a serious person in a first world society should become uneasy with a life of leisure in old age. Some naïve among us might argue that we have totally earned a life in leisure in old age. Many admit that our chance of birth and some luck or social forces out side our control have determined our fate. Thus there is also an ethical dimension of how we should spend our later years.

In 1991 I recall Dave Smith, MD, Director, of Texas Department of Health, told us at a meeting that he had two major challenges in Texas. One of those was the low rate of childhood immunization and the low quality of nursing home care. Discussing how the newly created Texas Institute for Research and Education on Aging could respond to these needs, Ann Reban and I came up with the Seniors and Volunteers for Childhood Immunization concept in 1992 to needs of children.

The U.S. Administration on Aging, after creating pilot projects in Dallas & Denton provided some funding to begin this twelve year adventure across Texas and the United States. One of the inspiring memories is of the five African-American retirees at the Martin Luther King Health Center in Dallas going through clinic records in 1993, checking for completion of children's immunizations.

From this project, the notion of "senior reengagement" entered my lexicon. The idea and faith emerged that senior citizens could lead the way in creating a more sustainable and equitable world and future. Our partnership with the Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement (EASI.org) and its leader Tom Benjamin was one direction our Institute also took. Concepts such as sustainable communities, a healthy or sustainable neighborhood, sustainable housing and sustainable agriculture became integrated into our Center and our University. Conferences on sustainable futures from 1995 onward occurred in Denton, Texas and Guadalajara, Mexico. A Senior Environmental Corps in Denton, Texas and Chapala, Mexico, the Service Learning Office, the UNT Volunteer Center, and American Humanic Program at the School of Community Service at the University of North Texas owe their beginnings to the SVCI project creation in 1992.

In some ways the creation of the Educational Consortium for Volunteerism at UNT under Pamela Sybert's direction underscores our attempt to introduce an "ethos and ethic" of a lifetime of service for all citizens. Educational Consortium on Volunteerism emerged from SVCI project.

Senior/Volunteers for Childhood Immunization address the issue of "senior reengagement" as well as three global crises in a small way: 1) misdistributions of wealth, 2) global decline of ecosphere and 3) the failure to address unethical behavior as well as corporate and governmental corruption on the planet.