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English III

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The mayor of Paul Ave

Sitting at a window facing the street, you can find Ralph with a pair of binoculars and a magazine to keep him entertained. For my whole life, I have seen Ralph in his habitat, whether it was walking to the candy store or skating across the street with my friends. If you were to walk along Paul Avenue you would find a sweet dark-wooden house with a beautiful garden which he tends to with the same care and attention that he tends to our neighborhood.

In the heart of our community, there's a man named Ralph who, at over 80 years old, has become a testament to the importance of intergenerational relationships. For more than four decades, Ralph has been a constant presence in our neighborhood, his life deeply intertwined with the rhythms and routines of those around him.

Living alone, Ralph spends his days tending to his garden, an intricate range of green and yellows covering every corner of his property. But his contributions extend beyond his garden's boundaries. He watches over the neighborhood, his presence as comforting as it is constant. You can often find him chatting with the dog walkers, morning joggers, and afternoon strollers.

Ralph's story is a compelling example of elders' role in strengthening community bonds. His diverse outlook on life, shaped by years of experience, brings a unique perspective that fosters understanding and respect among different generations. His kindness and generosity have not only enriched our community but also highlighted the potential that lies in recognizing and valuing the wisdom of our elders.

In a society that undervalues wisdom and strives for youth, the importance of social opportunities and the role of elders in a community get easily overlooked. It’s a narrative that invites us to reflect on how we can better integrate and appreciate the elders in our own communities. Ralph’s life, so intertwined into the fabric of our neighborhood, shows us that age does not diminish value. Instead, it can enhance it, bringing people together in ways that uplift us all.

In his dark wooden house surrounded by the forest of his making, Ralph lives alone. Not that he is at all lonely, he just prefers his own company most of the time. At 89 years young, he refuses to even think about the prospect of ever moving into a nursing home. When asked about it his response was, "Why would I ever need to move into a nursing home when I have lovely neighbors which I need to refuse help more than I ask for it"(Ralph). Ralph lives his life far from self-sufficient receiving aid whenever he needs it from the community which loves to help him out at any opportunity. While this situation feels out of the norm, many different societies would be astounded and revolted at the idea of sending your elderly away from those who care about them.

I decided to look deeper and found writer Grace Birnstengel, A writer for Next Avenue who suggested the culture of nursing homes was brought by US settlers and were called "Almhouses, which hosted not only the oldest old, but also orphans, people with disabilities and those facing addiction or without homes. They provided shelter, daily meals and that's about it." Ibis Home, an industry researcher, finds The U.S. nursing care market in 2023 to be valued at "475.15 billion". Nursing homes are generally for the elderly who need around-the-clock care, and those with illness or memory issues. The fact of the issue however is that because the nursing homes themselves are a business, the facilities are usually lacking, the food is often of poor quality and generally leaves the elderly in unpleasant living situations. Considering you send someone to an elderly home when they are in their last stages of life, why would you send them away to live without you? This treatment of the elderly however has cemented itself into

the culture of the US proven by the value of the nursing home industry. What I end up asking myself is, When did the US lose its respect and interest in caring for the elderly?

Retire is a word that doesn't even exist in Japanese as they have an entirely different outlook on how they treat their elderly. Thisanka Siripala, writer for the Diplomat states, "Seniors are at the top of the social hierarchy. They even have a national holiday dedicated to honoring the contributions of the elderly in society". In Japan, it is the norm to have multiple generations living under the same roof and to take care of their elderly till they pass. Their wisdom is often revered and given the utmost respect as they have lived through more life than those younger generations. They also believe in staying in the workforce much longer than they do in the US and often work into their 80s and 90s which leads to longer and healthier lives.

Unlike Japan, the US has an almost unhealthy obsession with staying young. Researcher Reese Martin found that "when the young-adult baby boomers of the post-war era entered the market around the 1960s, media, and marketing tools that promoted the value of youthfulness and ageist messages became prolific". Industries began targeting the younger generation with messages that made them out to be cooler and better than their parents and grandparents. Companies saw this new market as lucrative and took advantage of this generation finding success in rock & roll as well as media centered around being young. Because of the success found within this new market the same advertising continued throughout the years until today. With the emergence of social media and worldwide broadcasting, this sentiment has only grown. When the whole world is looking at you of course you want to fit in and be in the best shape you can be. Since youth has been marketed towards everyone of course you're going to fear growing old and losing your perfect skin and metabolism. When asked about his thoughts on growing older, Ralph had "mixed feelings", While he was entirely happy to grow old, he misses "the spryness of youth". This issue has led to the younger generations fearing age altogether and constantly comparing themselves to others.

As someone who's lived through it all Ralph has an endless amount of wisdom which he is more than willing to share if you just take the time to talk to him. Ralph was raised on a ranch where he says he learned the skills of working hard and learning how to struggle. He reminisces about waking up before dawn and milking the cows, mentioning how he "hated every second of it" (Ralph). He even thought that his parents didn't love him for making him do all that work. But as I talked with him he reflected on the skills he gained and the work ethic which helped him through the rest of his life. My personal favorite piece of advice which he has imparted to me also happens to be his favorite catchphrase "Don't do dumb things, but if you can't help it then don't get in trouble". I find this one especially fun because it bridges the gap between generations as he's speaking from a place where he has made dumb decisions and gotten in trouble plenty of times in his life.

Even though he likes to mention that he lives his life like nobody is watching, he is an active member of the community and can be seen at the neighborhood soup nights sharing stories from his youth. Every Wednesday our neighborhood hosts everyone to share food and to talk about changes in each other's lives. It is the perfect opportunity to get to know everyone you live around and to create a tightly woven community where everyone cares for one another. Started by Brian Smith, soup nights have been running for over two decades and provide everyone the opportunity to play and learn from each other. When asked about why he started this tradition he simply replies "I wanted to create a community where everyone gets to know each other and can get along" (Mr. Smith).

In the same way that he carefully tends to his garden, Ralph puts the same care into building our community to grow a friendly neighborhood where everyone never hesitates to help and reach out to those in need. Every day you can find him watering and trimming the plants. If you ever find yourself near downtown or walking along Paul Avenue I implore you to take the chance to strike up a conversation and maybe you'll learn a thing or two.

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