

AGING TODAY

Vol. XXIX, No. 3

PAGE 16

May–June 2008

ISSN: 1043-1284

www.agingtoday.org

ASA UPDATE

INNOVATION, DIVERSITY KEY THEMES AS STUEN STARTS NEW TERM

In my last column, I wrote about the sage advice and guidance I received from Robyn Golden, who served as chair of the American Society on Aging (ASA) board of directors during my first year as the association's president and CEO. Robyn, who completed her term in March, now chairs ASA's Public Policy Committee and Nominating Committee, and continues on the board. In this issue, I want to tell you about Cynthia Stuen, ASA's new board chair for 2008–2010, who accepted the gavel from Robyn during ASA's annual conference in Washington, D.C., in March.

The senior vice president for policy and professional affairs at Lighthouse International in New York City, Cynthia is one of the foremost experts on vision impairment and older adults in the United States. At Lighthouse, Cynthia oversees the Arlene R. Gordon Research Institute, its Center on Education and its policy and advocacy work.

Cynthia, who holds a doctorate in social work from Columbia University, has focused on issues in gerontology throughout her career. Her long list of publications, presentations, educational endeavors and research covers topics of age-related sensory loss, access to environments for older adults with impaired vision, and contributions older adults and their families and friends can make to program planning and service delivery. Not only a distinguished researcher, Cynthia also is known as an avid public-policy advocate for older adults at national, state and local levels. Furthermore, she is involved in international efforts to preserve sight and prevent excess disability resulting from vision impairment.

Currently, at the Lighthouse, she is the principal investigator on a federal grant from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality titled "Creating an Evidence Base for Vision Rehabilitation." In addition, Cynthia is consulting on a Lighthouse grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to offer innovative online training for vision rehabilitation paraprofessionals.

*Widely published in the field, Cynthia was a co-guest editor of the issue of ASA's journal *Generations* titled "Aging and the Senses" (Spring 2003). She has also served as cochair of the Aging Today editorial board. In addition, Cynthia was a chapter author for the award-winning Lighthouse Handbook on Vision Impairment and Vision Rehabilitation (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2000) and edited its section titled "Rehabilitation of Older Adults With Vision Impairment."*

A fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine and the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), Cynthia also was honored with ASA's Leadership Award in 2005. I could go on about her accomplishments, but I'd rather let you read about her work with ASA, and her passion, in her own words. I asked Cynthia to reflect on her more than 20 years as a member and a leader of ASA, and her thoughts follow.

—Robert G. Stein
ASA President and CEO

ASA: MY PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

By CYNTHIA STUEN
ASA BOARD CHAIR

It is a privilege to be chair of the American Society on Aging. I joined ASA about the time it became a national organization in 1985, when ASA changed its name from the Western Gerontological Society. I found a community of like-minded professionals at ASA, and early on I became involved with ASA's Education Committee. At that time, I was at Columbia University finishing my doctorate. I developed the Seniors Teaching Seniors program there and a project to involve retired faculty. Additionally, I learned that ASA wanted to develop partnerships with state societies on aging, and I was active in the New York State Society on Aging.

At first I worked with the Lifelong Learning Network, which would evolve into ASA's Lifetime Education and Renewal Network (LEARN). Those years were the era when college for seniors, lifelong learning institutes and similar programs for older-adult education were taking shape along with an interest in intergenerational learning opportunities. People I met through ASA nurtured me with ideas evolving across the United States in this important area of older-adult learning.

I joined Lighthouse International in 1987 and became director of its National Center for Vision and Aging. Now that I was addressing issues of sensory loss, I noticed that the aging network was not giving much attention to issues of disabilities. Again, ASA was on the cutting edge. Leaders, such as Fernando Torres-Gil, who would overcome childhood polio and become U.S. Assistant Secretary of Aging, helped establish a new ASA constituent group called the Aging, Disability and Rehabilitation Network (now NEST, the Network on Environments, Services and Technologies for Maximizing Independence). NEST's mission is to maximize the potential for people with disabling conditions. I was also privileged to serve in leadership capacities for both LEARN and NEST, and I've served on the ASA board of directors and many task forces and committees during the last two decades.

It is always an honor to be tapped by one's peers for leadership, so it did not take me long to accept the nomination to be chair of the ASA board. As I reflect on my many years of involvement with ASA, I find that I've come to associate the organization with two words—*innovation* and *diversity*. ASA has been at the forefront of recognizing and promoting innovation in the field of aging. The annual conferences continue to inspire me, and I always, always learn something new or am challenged to think of long-tenured programs in a new way. Diversity is also a hallmark of ASA's leadership in the field of aging, and I mean diversity in its broadest sense. ASA provides a broad umbrella for many professionals in aging and those we serve, such as elders of color, people with disabilities, those of any sexual orientation, representatives of the business world, individuals from many spiritual backgrounds, and others, all coming together to make aging in the United States the best it can be.

What will be the future of aging in our society? I was recently struck by the words of Arthur C. Clarke, the prescient author of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and so many other visionary books. As it happens, Clarke died at age 90 in March, on the eve of the annual ASA conference. His March 19 *New York Times* obituary noted that among his legacies are "Clarke's Three Laws," provocative observations published in his 1962 book *Profiles of the Future*—statements I find applicable today. Clarke wrote:

- *When a distinguished elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.*

- *The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.*

- *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.*

I think ASA needs to continue to think outside the box, think of the impossible and set its sights on achieving a vision that enables the gerontological workforce to lead the way in innovation. This endeavor will also require partnership with the entrepreneurs and technology developers in addition to the traditional health and human service providers. I remember hearing futurist Buckminster Fuller speak in 1968 about cars that would talk and tell you how to get where you wanted to go. "Impossible," I thought. Well, it is 2008: Global positioning systems are quite common in cars—and they're not magic.

As for what's new at ASA in 2008, a new benefit gives members access to ASA's constituent groups—from the Healthcare and Aging Network to LEARN—without additional fees. Very shortly, ASA will offer online Knowledge Networks to promote networking among the organization's growing

membership. So join me and become more involved in the work of ASA. Let me hear from you about your wishes and your ideas for making ASA stronger and even more diverse. I'm eager to learn what you think is the next cutting-edge issue we should be addressing. E-mail me at cstuen@lighthouse.org.

