

## A Health Educator Never Retires: A Light Hearted Look at Retirement

Muzza Eaton

*A Retired Health Educator*

### Abstract

This article presents a light-hearted view of a retired health educator now residing in Sacramento, California. A retired health educator continues to involve herself in health-related activities, such as volunteer work, exercise, and participation in environmental enjoyment programs and political advocacy.

© 2003 Californian Journal of Health Promotion. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* retirement, health educator, health education, health professions

After teaching for over 20 years, at a large New York City college, I finally retired to Sacramento, California. I was through with health education. I was through with meetings, with the literature, with the stress of organizing meetings, with the disappointments of partially successful programs. I was going to read, and travel and enjoy California. So, when I was asked to write an article about retirement of a health educator, my immediate reaction was, "I am no longer a health educator!"

Then I looked at my new life and found that although I was no longer "educating", I was living what I had taught for so many years. My mind set only allowed a "healthy life". I had retired in stages. For the first 8 years, I returned to New York and taught one semester a year. During my retired semester, I looked for ways to occupy myself.

One of the first groups I joined, was an exercise group. It was composed of about 20 elderly ladies who met 3 times a week in the exercise room of my condo development and turned, twisted, stretched and talked for 50 minutes. During one less strenuous wall exercise, jokes were shared and everyone had a good laugh. Some of these ladies had been exercising together for over 30 years!

They started in an adult education group at a local school and when the instructor left, they continued on their own. Some talked more than

they exercised, some only did the standing exercises, all took time off for traveling, and horror of horrors, all went to coffee in the club house afterwards. It began with coffee at a coffee shop nearby, but then that closed and they moved to the club house and someone brought cookies, and then someone brought a birthday cake, and so cookies and birthday cakes and coffee became the standard. If we ran out of cookies, there would be disappointment and volunteers would contribute more. When it was my turn, I would bring low-calorie cookies, a compromise!

Can I justify this as healthy behavior? No problem. They were a healthy bunch of 70+ ladies. None was overweight, none smoked, none overused drugs, I think they drank in moderation. Were they healthy because they exercised or did they exercise because they were healthy? Has that question ever been truly answered? This group addressed the physical, social, emotional, and possibly spiritual aspects of health. During the sessions and at coffee, everyone shared information about the latest health news in the local paper and the latest developments in the HMOs. Every so often, someone would suggest a new exercise they read about and the leader kept herself informed on physical fitness. Since I was no longer a health educator, I didn't feel, I had to evaluate and correct minor inaccuracies. I was one of the exercise ladies, not a health educator. As for the caloric "rewards" which followed the exercise,

none overate, and actually it was a way for some to get rid of excess stores at home and remove the likelihood of over indulging! Furthermore, it allowed for a continuation of shared information. Exercise was the focus and the cookies and conversation were the rewards.

Unfortunately over time, some left the group. A few got sick, a few died, a few had to care for husbands who became ill, some moved to other locations because they needed more care and needed to be near their children. There was a continuation of concern and contacts. The new lives were of interest. The activity was listed in the community calendar and new faces often appeared. The younger ones came equipped with towels and exercise paraphernalia, but they quickly disappeared. The older ones stayed. With one exception, men never came. Sometimes an illness or accident caused a hiatus. When the leader could not be there, someone else took over. It was a remarkably stable group.

I believe, that the major reasons for the longevity of the group were the social health aspects and the cookies! Very early in my health education career, I learned the importance of cookies! They were rewards, and they completed a healthful meal in a satisfying way. Furthermore, the coffee time allowed for support and shared information: recipes, repairmen, medical problems, doctors, dentists, even older parents, children, grandchildren and travel possibilities were discussed. Some of the participants met for breakfast and/or lunch or theater. Some shared church attendance or other organizations. Once or twice a year, the group put on a TGIF at the clubhouse for the whole development. It was the "exercise group" and exercise was their *raison d'être*. I organize my day to always include the exercise.

My other health related activity was swimming. There were several outdoor pools in the development and one was an Olympic sized lap pool. It was heated and open 5 months of the year. This was where I noticed a sex related difference that was never discussed in sexuality classes. At the risk of being accused of gender bias, I will describe it. The pool depth varied

from three and a half to five feet and diving was not allowed. The ladies, young and old, would climb down the ladders and swim back and forth using whatever strokes they preferred or do water exercises. The men were different. The very old walked and talked, but it was the young and middle aged ones who were a problem. They would jump into the pool with a loud splash and proceed to swim vigorously creating great waves and splashes. This interfered with my quiet, leisurely gliding. Fortunately, most of them did not swim for very long or come regularly. A few laps and they were out of there, allowing me to continue my half hour of side stroke. There was a small group that came to the pool regularly at certain hours. However, swimming is not a social activity, it is hard to talk with your face under water. Some ladies overcame this difficulty by using waist flotation devices while they moved their arms and legs and mouths. I was not of that group. However, there were always a few acquaintances and we would sit together for a while.

There was yet another exercise I enjoyed. This was the walkabout. Sacramento is situated on two great rivers and one of them, the American River, has bike, horse and walking trails running along 27 miles of its banks. There are also trails around lakes, parks and other rivers; the Cosumnes River Preserve being one of my favorites. I had joined the Renaissance Society, a "Learning in Retirement" organization. This society meets during the college semesters at California State University, Sacramento. Of the 600 or so members, 20-30 meet once a week during the semester, for a short hike. We walked two to four miles along trails chosen by one or another member. Older people have special needs. Each week, the leader sent around a description of the meeting place, the type of trail, the location of the rest rooms (very important) and the location of the lunch which followed. There were usually two groups, the "hares" and the "tortoises" and each group had a leader. The hares walked four miles and the tortoises two. One could choose and switch. No one was to be left behind. Aside from enjoying the beauty of the environment and the occasional wildlife, deer and turkeys are not unusual, mountain lions are, we would pair up and get to

know one another as we walked. The pairs kept changing as the pace of the individuals changed. In the spring there were marvelous wild flowers and sometimes rain, in the fall beautiful trees. This summer a small group kept on going when the semester ended. Sacramento, known for its hot summers, always cools off at night and early morning are delightful.

Most Renaissance meetings are held on the campus on Fridays and since I live about a mile away across the river, I would walk to these meetings (another exercise). The meetings contributed exercise for the mind. In addition to invited speakers on all sorts of subjects, the members organized into 40 seminars. Some were not exactly seminars, such as Tai Chi, but most were. One got to choose and then participate in a variety of ways, usually by presenting a talk on the subject of the seminar. Thus I found myself talking about the voyages around Cape Horn and Straits of Magellan and over the Panama Isthmus to reach the gold mines of California. This related well to my trip to Tierra del Fuego that spring. Another was the history and nature of food in Denmark followed by smorgasbord lunch in preparation to my trip to Denmark. During the History of England seminar, I spoke about the "Warrior" Queens: Boadicea and Maud. My favorite was the Personal History seminar where I got to know some fascinating and personal histories of several members and where I started my autobiography which I finished a couple of years later. The real value of these activities lay in the library work I did. For an ex-college professor, learning is as important as eating and breathing and preparing for the seminars led to great satisfaction. The 600 or so members were able to feed their psychological health needs with a great variety of activities.

Finally, can an ex-health educator be content without "helping" others? Volunteer work to contribute to others as well as oneself seemed terribly important. And yet, that was the least successful or rewarding of my endeavors. Environmental Health and Women's Health were my priorities. Sacramento has a great deal

of air pollution, some of it from the San Francisco Bay area but much of it from the traffic caused by the typical urban sprawl similar to that of most California cities. The American Lung Association addressed that problem. So I volunteered. It was fun helping hundreds of children carry their long, long rolls of signatures around the Capitol and into the Governor's office to protest the diversion of anti-smoking money from health to other things. However, work on a policy committee was frustrating, no one was interested in attacking the SUV problem, and I quit. Helping women enter a Planned Parenthood Clinic past the anti-abortion activists was not fun, and I did that for a while, ignoring the abuse being yelled. Going to sexuality meetings for teens was frustrating due to the small response, as was the meeting with women in a shelter. The "fairs" both environmental and health-related, although well attended, did not strike me as very effective. So, I am still looking for something health-related and useful.

I have not given up on those issues and am pursuing political activities via the Internet. Diane and Barbara and I are on a first name basis! They vote the way I tell them to and thank me for writing. So I keep on writing and calling and e-mailing! Actually they are very good Senators as is my Representative. We are lucky to have them. My correspondence with the President does not bring the same response. He keeps destroying the environmental protections that we all worked so hard to develop and his concern with the needs of women around the world is that of his fundamentalist, right-wing supporters. He doesn't listen to me! Well, there are many good people out there in computer land and we will keep plugging away. In some cases we are successful.

So, life as a health education retiree is different. It is less stressful, there is more time to play, one is more aware of one's mortality and is more accepting of one's limitations. I loved teaching and doing health promotion and I am still doing it.

Author Information

Muzza Eaton, PhD  
Sacramento, CA

*The CJHP encourages retired health educators to submit articles about their experiences adjusting to their new lives. Also, health educators who are contemplating retirement in the near future, and are debating with themselves about whether they should retire, are encouraged to submit papers about their life experiences. Children or other family members of health educators are encouraged to submit candid manuscripts about life living with a health educator.*