

The OKLAHOMAN

January 22, 2006

The baby boomers are turning 60

By Penny Cockerell

As the baby boomers' generation moves into its sixth decade, the question remains: How do we define them?

Not all boomers burned bras or protested the Vietnam War, though plenty did. Not all of them smoked dope. And certainly not as many attended Woodstock as have claimed.

Now that those who thrived in the '60s are turning 60, some have found a new appreciation for gray hair and love handles, while others fight like crazy to stay young.

And while some boomers consider themselves more evolved and tolerant than their parents, the generation behind them worries about caring for the boomer masses as they head into retirement.

Defining this generation of 77 million is elusive at best. Boomers, after all, span a 19-year period with no easy bookends. The oldest boomers graduated from college in the 'summer of love' while late boomers were educated in the Reagan years. Even today, some boomers have children in preschool, while others are grandparents.

And yet one characteristic cannot be denied: Size. The baby boomer generation is nearly twice the size of any generation before them. Only the so-called Generation Y, which spans 1981 to 1999, approaches that number.

"I think because of our numbers we'll have an impact until this generation is gone," said Sharon King Davis, a Tulsa real estate developer who, at 58, is a front-end boomer.

Davis recalls a childhood embedded in the carefree '50s, when she rode the bus downtown to socialize and followed the race to the moon. Her counterparts born in the early '60s, however, recall a much different society, with turbulence and assassinations and a growing generation gap.

But were the '50s as carefree as people believe? To understand what boomers accomplished, looking back on what they started with is important.

In the '50s, a woman's place was in the kitchen, pollution was rampant, and Jim Crow laws kept races separate. Until Watergate, the government had no problem keeping secrets and, at home, some parents of gay

children sought shock therapy to cure their children's sexual tendencies.

"We take our culture for granted right now, but boomers have been everyday heroes in remaking this culture," said Leonard Steinhorn, a professor at American University in Washington, whose book, "The Greater Generation: In Defense of the Baby Boom Legacy," will be published this month.

Steinhorn, a boomer himself, said his generation's biggest impact comes more in a gradual revolution from accepted norms, such as segregation, not from Vietnam or Woodstock. Boomers cleaned up their cities and pushed for personal freedoms, but that took decades. They gained equal status for women, created family-friendly workplaces, and demanded a more open government.

"There are going to be no great 'Saving Private Ryan' movies about doing that," Steinhorn said. "It hasn't been a quiet acceptance of the status quo, it's been a boisterous reshaping of

society. But there is no single epic battle."

Still, in Margaret Phipps' mind, her generation has a long way to go.

Phipps, 58, a pastoral associate at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Oklahoma City, said the values she held at age 18 haven't changed much, though the frequency of her aches and pains has.

As Phipps grew older, her world expanded. When she shops, Phipps considers whether a garment-maker runs a sweat shop overseas, or whether a pineapple grower has put Central American family farms out of business.

"I was real involved in justice issues and caring for people that kind of fell out of society. Now there seems to be a greater number of those people that aren't part of the social structure," Phipps said.

"Boomers seemed to care a lot about that in the '60s or '70s and then they got caught up in the 'me' generation."

Phipps believes many boomers now are only concerned about their own families, their own retirement nest eggs. She wonders what happened to that great social consciousness she knew when she was young. But she hasn't given up either.

"I may be pushing 60 and looking toward and looking forward to retirement, but I need

to continue to grow," Phipps said. "Other than the physical changes, the pain and stuff that goes on, it's really kind of wonderful. I would not want to go backwards at all."

At age 60, Larry Kemp of Oklahoma City is one month older than the first set of boomers. Though he graduated from high school with the first boomers in 1964, he said he respects the generation before him more than he does his own.

"Now they've all got Harley-Davidsons and are enjoying the good life," Kemp said.

"Basically, we have done some good things but we haven't had to struggle like our parents did with dust bowls and the Depression."

Boomers have indeed created the good life. An unprecedented number of them travel and return home to a grander lifestyle, with more money in the bank. They've experienced good news with the Berlin Wall falling and the demise of the Soviet Union.

For five decades, boomers survived without the Internet and now embrace its worldwide reach. Life has more information and gadgets than folks can keep up with.

Because of a greater age expectancy, boomers who reach 65 may easily have another decade or two in retirement. But retirement won't be the same as your grandparents'. Boomers

plan to stay far more active, with some starting second or even third careers.

Dr. Marie Bernard is a member of the American Geriatrics Society and chairs the Reynolds Department of Geriatric Medicine at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

A boomer herself, Bernard points to a large gap between boomers who easily can afford health care into retirement and those who are destitute. All have access to medical care, but the larger middle class likely will struggle to meet expenses.

"Boomers will be protesting lack of services into their '60s, '70s and '80s," Bernard said. "I'm actually surprised there isn't more of an outcry by now."

Some in the younger generation are hoping for that outcry soon.

Matt Moore, a senior policy analyst with the National Center for Policy Analysis in Dallas, which studies issues regarding Social Security and Medicare, wonders why these entitlements aren't receiving more attention.

"You've got this huge shift of people going from the 'pay-in' window to the 'pay-me-now' window," Moore said.

Like other Gen Xers who follow the boomer generation, Moore's own future plans depend on what current

leaders do now about this soon-to-be-retired generation.

For better or worse, boomers sometimes take credit for changes that were beyond their control. For instance, boomers had little effect on the shift to a service-driven society, the globalization of the economy, or on such things as a global oil crisis all world events that affect them and others, said Mary Elizabeth Hughes, an assistant sociology professor at Duke University who co-authored a study debunking some boomer myths.

"They're known as the 'me' generation and they reformed the world. Well, no. They created more change, but it's not like they started the whole thing," said Hughes, an early boomer.

Nor is it true that divorce is higher for boomers than for prior generations, said Hughes, whose study found that the generation born before and during World War II, not the boomers, had the sharpest increase in divorce.

And perhaps the best is yet to come. Even at 60, boomers are active and involved in everything

from business to child rearing to setting national policy.

Phipps said she still holds out hope for another boomer revolution, when her counterparts reject materialism and regain the free spirit and optimism of their youth. Then, she said, they'll truly have left their mark.

"I hope we have something in the future that we're known for," she said. "I hope we're not through."