

Part II: A Generational Tsunami

By Stephen F. Barnes, Ph.D.

By now everyone knows there are a lot of Baby Boomers around the country, about 78 million of them, ranging in age from 43 to 61. It is highly probable if you are reading this article you are one yourself or there is one or more in your family, but most certainly you know at least one Boomer. You should also be aware they pretty much run the country—government, criminal justice system, schools and colleges, non-profits, and companies of all shapes and sizes. That's what adults in the 40-60 year range usually do, run things, own things.

- Bill Clinton was our first Boomer President, George W. Bush our second, Al Gore was almost a Boomer President.
- Over 75 percent of the top companies in America (S&P 500) are run by Boomers, and 56 percent of those are in the 50-59 year range. Not only that, Baby Boomers currently make up more than half of the entire labor force (65 million workers).
- While most Boomers fall into the middle-income range, typically they own their homes (76 percent), some have second homes as well. When they are considered as a group, however, the financial assets they control are breathtaking--\$42 trillion. Boomer's hold 7.6 trillion in stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and IRA's. More than 80 percent of all funds in savings accounts are theirs. Their estimated annual spending power is \$2.1 trillion. They own a lot of America and wield considerable financial leverage. By the way, Bill Gates, the richest man in the world is a Boomer.

Despite advancing age they still star in, direct, and produce movies and other forms of entertainment for the rest of us, thanks to Boomers like Steven Spielberg, Jim Carey, Glenn Close, Tom Cruise, Jimmy Buffet, Sandra Bullock, Russell Crowe, Whoopie Goldberg, Tom Hanks, Spike Lee, Madonna, Bill Murray, Brad Pitt, Howard Stern, Oliver Stone, Meryl Streep, Bill Bob Thornton, and Oprah Winfrey. Two of the four nightly news anchors are Boomers. Their days as great athletes while fading are still memorable. Who can forget, for example, Charles Barkley, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, John McEnroe, Cal Ripkin, Nolan Ryan, Mark Spitz, Steve Young—to name a few.

Boomers have also been busy inventing things — like rock-n-roll, 60-hour work week, oral contraceptives, jogging, diet soft drinks, credit cards, skateboards, post-it notes, computer gaming, mountain bikes, fax machines, Segway human transporter, and Viagra. They have contributed to remarkable technology advances, such as personal computers and the Internet, cell phones, pacemakers and artificial hearts, recombinant DNA research, Human Genome Project, space exploration, AIDS research, and clinical advances in the treatment of all diseases. They won five Noble Prizes in 2006, four in 2004, two in 2003, one in 2002. No one will be surprised if they lead the world response to global warming, greatly reduce world hunger, establish a human colony on the moon, and figure out how we can walk on Mars

They have added new words to the English language, such as, Bermuda shorts, bitchin,' far out, dork, weirdo, geek, joint, truckin', trail mix, video game, diskette, microbrewery, scrunchy. And, they are responsible for creating or popularizing many new concepts, such as, hippies, dropping out, trippin', cruising, forty something, skydiving, cable television, jet lag, sexism, consciousness-raising, passive smoking, compact discs, desktop publishing, junk food, emoticon, glass ceiling, in-line skating, people with disabilities, web site, and bad hair day.

Born in Philadelphia one second after midnight on January 1, 1946, Kathleen Casey-Kirschling is credited as being the first Baby Boomer. She has attracted enormous media attention over the years, but has handled it with intelligence and humor. She has been described as articulate, smart and quick, health-conscious and fit, critical and hopeful, educated, lifelong learner, compassionate, and generous. She is now a grandmother to five, but like many has lived several lives — marriage, career, children, divorce, remarriage.

Is there a Boomer profile, a common denominator that captures and defines this vast generation of 78 million adults? Consider the following.

Barbara Chavez is 52, single, career-oriented. She has lots of friends, plays golf occasionally, and walks her dog nearly every day after work. She recently completed a cookbook of favorite family recipes, something she likes to call “comfort food.” Five years ago she was diagnosed with breast cancer but early detection has produced an outstanding disease prognosis. She has become a dedicated participant and vocal champion for the Susan G. Komen “walk for the cure.”

Tim McGuire is 57, a father of two, and my next-door neighbor. He spent most of his career in insurance but is now semi-retired. His wife is an elementary school teacher. Their youngest will be starting college next year. Tim's father is 85, lives in another state, and the family is struggling with his growing health problems and increasing need for care. Tim likes cycling and rides either a road bike or mountain bike nearly everyday. He works on his house and keeps the yard up. On Sunday's the whole family goes to church. He votes in every election.

These are Boomers you have probably never heard of, who will not be in the headlines or the Guinness Book of Records. They are honest, good people. They love and are loved. They pay their taxes. They are “typical” in the narrow use of the term, but more importantly, they are the life force coursing through the veins and arteries of America. They are caught up in a huge generational tsunami that has swept across the land, flooding it with people who care about things, ordinary people with purpose.