

Salzman: Trends to Expect in 2014 ... and Beyond

By **Marian Salzman**
Jan. 6, 2014

Age is more than the proverbial number today, and for trends we'll see in the new year, it's a thread in the narratives of many that I'm forecasting. From retirement age now being midcareer to our workplaces looking more and more like millennials, Americans are challenging and redefining age markers.

Education, for instance, is stretching on well into the 20s, creating the new hybrid life stage of "adulthood." With the tough economy and debts, millennials are delaying a lot of the traditional 20s markers such as buying a car, buying a home, getting married and having children. To anybody who has been around for a while, it's no exaggeration to say that today's 30 is the new 20.

The knock-on effect of this is that millennials seem to be turning off to Connecticut's suburbs as they feel drawn to more urban environments. The big question is whether this is a generational change or a life-stage effect driven by circumstances. In other words, will Connecticut's millennials continue with their urban preferences if and when they settle down and have a family? Some argue that millennials will revert to the patterns established by their parents and end up suburban, just a little later than previous generations.

My sense is that their urban phase will last long enough to influence the way our cities, suburbs and transportation systems respond. With the massive urban magnet of New York City so close, Fairfield County in particular will need plenty more creative thinking to attract the energy, creativity and tax dollars of post-urban millennials.

Meanwhile, among the older demographics, 50 is the new 30 (thank goodness) and -- as Martha Stewart and Geraldo Rivera have confirmed -- 70 is the new 50. Talk of 100 being the new 80 might sound jokey now, but stick around a few years; you'll see. (Jerry Springer, this one's for you: It might be time to jump off the DNA bandwagon and focus on the lifestyle dramas of the not quite aged.)

For Connecticut, it's just as well that the older are getting younger because the age profile of the state is trending older. We have a

higher proportion of over-65s than the nation as a whole (14.2 percent vs. 13.0 percent), up from 13.8 percent 10 years earlier. Dealing with the bulging wave of aging boomers is putting Connecticut ahead of the age trends on two important scores.

The first trend is care provision. Like seniors everywhere, older Connecticuters want to stay in their own homes as long as possible. This means providing affordable home-care services that cater to a whole range of basic needs such as food, health and transportation -- a cost burden, perhaps, but an opportunity for innovative providers, too. It also means having places where seniors can gather out of their homes and access resources.

Senior centers have been a growing part of the American landscape since they first took root in the '60s and '70s, but mostly where they are and what they do is a mystery; there's no register of them. Our state filled that gap with a survey into what's available. Among a lot of fascinating findings, we now know that the state has about 160 senior centers, of which 84.5 percent have a computer area and 33 percent have Wi-Fi.

The second trend is less logistical and more a cutting-edge cultural trend: addressing the issue of what meaningful roles seniors can create for themselves in our state and our nation. The restless generation that defied youth norms with long hair, jeans and rebellious attitudes is now setting new norms for seniors. They're unlikely to make the over-60 decades aspirational, but they might well make them more visible and more attractive.

They're also helping to make them more artisanal, as we all are curating our lifestyles to be more meaningful with less of everything. We're buying handmade products on Etsy or making them ourselves with the thousands of DIY books out there. Perhaps it's a reaction to some of the other trends I'm forecasting for the new year and beyond -- many a response to the sense that our world is dysfunctional and broken -- but people value homemade over mass-produced blandness. It just feels more authentic.