The Future of Aging

A new documentary by Christine Herbes-Sommers, F71, takes on the challenges America faces as more people live longer

The global transition to an older population "will require innovation and change in virtually every social institution in any society that wants to continue to be productive and humane," said Christine Herbes-Sommers. Photo: Alonso Nichols

By Heather Stephenson
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A century ago, the average American lived to be just 47 years old. Now, residents of the United States make it to 78 on average, and those lucky enough to reach 65 have an 80 percent chance of living another two decades. At the same time, fewer babies are being born. This shift to an older population isn’t limited to the United States—it’s also happening in Europe, China and Japan.

So what does it mean for a society to have so many people living so much longer?

That’s the question behind Coming of Age in Aging America, the latest documentary by Christine Herbes-Sommers, F71, an independent film producer based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The one-hour film will air on PBS stations in late March.
The global transition to an older population “will require innovation and change in virtually every social institution in any society that wants to continue to be productive and humane,” said Herbes-Sommers, who is 68. “Most scholars and thought leaders know that we are not even close to being ready for this sweeping change. So now is the time to take a 10,000-foot view of the issue, its challenges, and possible solutions across social and economic strata.”

Rather than looking at aging as an individual predicament, the documentary makes connections to social policies and institutions, tackling topics such as how we work and where we live and how those arrangements could—or should—be updated to meet the current reality.

One segment examines how a sprawling suburb in Georgia is being redesigned to create a walkable community for residents of all ages, with retail shops situated in residential neighborhoods. Another section explores how a hospital group is transforming its workplaces to allow employees to keep working as they grow older.

Many Americans in mid-life are currently overworked while raising families, the film points out. They then face a long retirement after age 65, often with no income other than Social Security, which was created when the average life expectancy was 62. Might it be better to work less in the middle of life, but longer at the end?

“There isn’t anything in the psychology literature that suggests that it’s good for people to go on vacation for decades,” Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, says in a trailer for the documentary. “As a psychologist, I’ll tell you the very first step that is really essential [to adapting to an aging society] and that is that we begin to envision new models, new ways of being.”

While the film tackles difficult realities, Herbes-Sommers tries to avoid the alarmism she’s seen in other treatments of what’s sometimes called the “silver tsunami” or the “aging time bomb.” Instead of hyping a looming crisis, she aims to inform and engage audiences by focusing on opportunities to improve life for everyone.

**Getting to Why**

Like Herbes-Sommers’ other award-winning films, *Coming of Age* is intended to influence civic dialogue and seed political action by getting audiences to ask, “Why are things this way?” and “Why do they have to be?”

For example, the 2015 series she produced, *The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of America*, explores the long-term negative effects on children—and thereby on the nation—when their parents are stressed for time, money and resources. Many public television stations worked with their local communities to create events related to the broadcast, to examine how family leave and child care could be improved.

Another PBS series Herbes-Sommers helped develop and produce, called *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?*, won the 2009 duPont Columbia Award for excellence in broadcast journalism and has become part of the curriculum at schools of medicine and public health. That four-part series examines how the social conditions we are born into affect our health and longevity even more than our habits, medical care or genes.

For the new documentary, Herbes-Sommers’ production company, Vital Pictures (http://www.vitalpix.com), has created a website that includes clips from the film and an animated trailer called “The Big Idea in 4 Minutes (http://www.theagingamericaproject.com/index.php),” which is already getting a lot of play at conferences on
She is about to launch a multiyear engagement project with partner institutions, such as the Stanford Center on Longevity and Temple University’s Communities for All Ages program, to develop plans for action to improve the way we live now that so many of us are living longer.

TV audiences can be passive, Herbes-Sommers said. “They don’t have any real skin in the game.” But people who attend screenings with partner organizations are usually more committed. “Films give them a magnet and a common language to talk about issues.”

Herbes-Sommers has been interested in using film to kick-start policy since she was a student at Fletcher. She earned a scholarship to Tufts by writing an essay about how mass media was changing public diplomacy.

But funding is harder to come by these days, she said, and her style of documentary—an “old-fashioned” format with expert talking heads and narration—is not as popular as it once was.

“My kinds of films are dinosaurs,” she said. “They’re big, expensive, complicated, challenging.”

Herbes-Sommers expects *Coming of Age in Aging America* to be her last film, but she isn’t headed to a quiet retirement. She hopes to take some of her documentaries on the road for a lecture tour, and she is rigorously pursuing her love of drawing and painting. She may even earn an MFA. “I’m not very good without goals,” she said.

*Coming of Age in Aging America* will air on public broadcasting stations starting March 29. Check your local listings. It will also be available as a DVD and via online streaming. For more information, see [http://www.theagingamericaproject.com/](http://www.theagingamericaproject.com/).

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