

Aging: The Impact from Every Tailored Action

By Jean Accius

*We are all in a drowning boat
Happened before at St. Domingue
We are the ones called boat people
We all died long ago
What else can frighten us
Let them call us boat people
We fight a long time with poverty
On our islands, the sea, everywhere*

-From the poem "Boat People" by Felix Morisseau-Leroy

Haitian writer and newspaper editor Felix Morisseau-Leroy was a man of the people. He grew up speaking French and English and developed a fascination with Creole while teaching in Port-au-Prince in the 1940s. He was the first to call for the language to take written form and be recorded, and he embraced its use in creative literature.

Morisseau-Leroy, through his love of language, was able to forge equity and inclusion in Haiti. He brought Creole up from what many called the "lower orders" into the mainstream. As a result, those who spoke Creole were no longer prey to marginalization. He was viewed as the father of the Creole Renaissance, the voice of Haiti, and his elevation of the Creole dialect helped it become the national language of Haiti in 1991.

Morisseau-Leroy fought for what he believed in, and wrote of his beliefs only in Creole, because he believed people can only understand and find solutions to their problems if they are communicated within their own language, not a language they didn't understand or was not their own. His work anchored the true spirit of Haitians in *fyète* — pronounced f-yet-tay — which means pride.

I tell you this story of Morisseau-Leroy because his approach of meeting people where they are, in a language they understand, is something equally important as we begin to build anew and emerge from this pandemic.

COVID turned our worlds upside down and our collective future depends on the choices we make today. As we continue to navigate the uncertainties around the global pandemic, it is clear that we cannot and should not go back to our old normal. That "normal" excluded entire communities, income brackets, ages and races. The old normal deprived many people of life's basic necessities. We cannot let what has happened in the last two years pass in vain.

I fundamentally believe that we have the capacity to create a better and more inclusive future where everyone can age with dignity, purpose and independence. To achieve this, however, we must make a concerted effort to speak the language that is spoken, spend time in the communities, shift the way we think about those we serve, looking first at what they have rather than what they lack and then co-create solutions that meet their preferences, goals and aspirations in the ways that work best for them.

Rather than pushing a one-size-fits-all approach that we know doesn't work everywhere, we must continually adjust our strategies and elevate policies, programs and other innovative solutions that are local yet scalable. More importantly, we must recognize that there is no system that cannot be improved, no reality that cannot be bettered, no hope that cannot be made real. We at AARP have always been at the forefront of the fight to empower people to age as they choose. This fight requires that we address the accumulated impact of barriers, burdens, and hardships over the course of a life that makes aging different

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for some, in both number and quality of years. We fight for each of us to help all of us.

In the following pages of this issue, you'll learn from some innovative examples that do just that, as we highlight unique solutions in some countries in Latin America and around the world.

This issue of our Journal, with a special focus on Latin America, is especially important to me. I was born in Haiti and spent my childhood there with my family. As a college student, I traveled to Panama on a study trip and learned about the culture and the people of that beautiful country. Today, as an executive at AARP, I look back on those times and experiences and can see how they influenced who I am today and, from a broader perspective, why the work we do matters.

At AARP, we help shape policies to increase healthy longevity, empower people and make systems equitable so everyone has the means to match their aspirations in health and life.

Things are changing fast. Rather than thinking about overcoming obstacles as a measure of success, we need to think about removing or preventing these obstacles in the first place. Our collaborations around the world can shift problem-solving strategies toward preventing age-related issues in the first place so that we have fewer problems to solve later, as people age.

Centered around aging across the lifespan in Latin America and highlighting the region's diverse populations, this issue of The Journal explores the successful strategies and innovations that are helping to provide people of all cultures in the region with access to health and high-quality and affordable long-term care.

All the world's countries have histories of surviving struggle and strife and all, in some way, continue to do so. It is up to us to set the stage for how we keep our nations moving forward and

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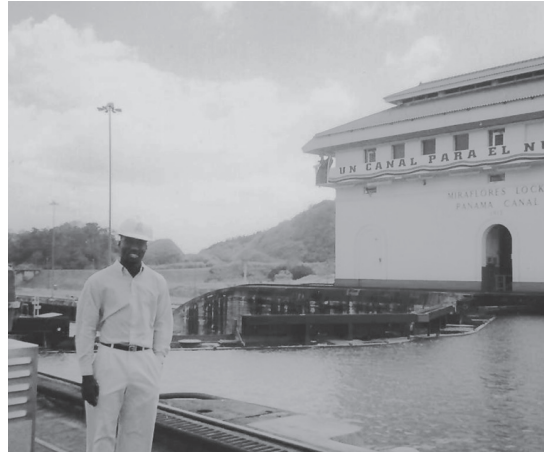
ensuring we can all age with healthy longevity. Everyone at every age deserves the chance to grow old and see the influences of the generations to come.

In the photos on the opposite page, I am four years old in Haiti, 19 years old in Panama, and 42 years old in the United States. They are here for a reason. I encourage you, our readers, to find pictures of yourself at various ages and life stages, then line them up: Just watch yourself grow older. At each stage, think about the opportunities you had and the opportunities you needed. Think about those things that may have been in place during each of those stages to put you on a more secure path for the future — and think about those things that may not have been in place. Then, fast-forward to today, and imagine your four-year-old neighbor down the street and reflect on what needs to be in place now for them to age well across their lifespan. Think about your 18-year-old niece and what she needs to ensure economic stability and growth in her future. Then,

think about the things you do today — and can do today — to build better systems and a better world so that when they are 42, 52, or 92, they have what they need to fully participate in society and contribute to the generations that come after them.

None of us achieves success or feels fulfilled on our own. My grandmother was the one who raised me in Haiti. The images are clear in my mind, in spite of the decades that have passed: my grandmother, waking up well before the sun rose in Haiti, lifting up her basket of goods and placing it over her head, and heading off to the marketplace. In the evenings, I'd see her return, exhausted after a long day but visibly content — no doubt in knowing she was successful in providing her family with food. What she would say, often in those moments, also can shape the actions we take from the research on these pages.

"Pran swen lòt moun vle di pran swen avni w."



The author at age four in Haiti; 19 years old during a trip to Panama; and below, at age 42.

Caring for others means caring for your future. We have a very real chance to rewrite the script of a post-COVID society — a script where the sequel can be better than the original. In everything we do, and with everything we have, we have an opportunity to construct a future that builds wealth, strengthens health, and ensures the same opportunities that benefit the privileged also benefit those historically marginalized and everyone in between.

This is not just wishful thinking. Everything we do impacts real people living real lives. So, let's work together to make sure we're putting systems and policies into place that make those lives the very best they can possibly be. Let's write a new story, speak a common language and let's make the script so much better than the original. ●



Jean Accius
Senior Vice President
AARP Global Thought
Leadership