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The Life Planning Network is the leading association supporting professionals who assist people at this life stage. We intend to bring into everyday use proactive and purposeful planning for the second half of life. Learn more at lifeplanningnetwork.org.

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A Future of Purposeful Aging

LPN-Q Interview with Jim Emerman

Bruce Frankel

Jim Emerman is Executive Vice President of Encore.org, a nonprofit spearheading efforts to engage millions of people in later life as a vital source of talent to benefit society. Emerman was the first director of The Purpose Prize, a \$100,000 prize for social innovators over the age of 60, and is currently responsible for Encore.org's programs that create pathways to link "encore talent" with opportunities for social impact, including the Encore Fellowships program, work with the higher education community and a new prize for innovations that bring about purposeful aging.

LPN-Q interviewed Jim at the Encore.org office in San Francisco's Presidio, where the walls are covered with gigantic photos of older mentors working with children in Experience Corps, a program begun by Encore.org, and a gigantic poster of every one of the 500+ individuals honored by The Purpose Prize. His own desk is cluttered with photos of his children and two grandchildren, with whom he spends many hours every week. We began by asking him about his own plans.

Jim, you've been with Encore for eleven years now and you're, what, 65? What does your own future look like?

Actually I just turned 66 and I don't plan on leaving this job for while. I've been fortunate though in having an employer that believes that people need balance in their lives, so I've been able to cut back one day a week to devote to family – taking care of my grandchildren a couple of times each week, visiting my 92-year old father in his nursing home every day, and also beginning to walk the encore walk, by serving as a writing tutor for the program 826 Valencia, working with 3rd, 4th and 5th graders one afternoon a week in the San Francisco Mission district.

What do you mean when you speak of a future of purposeful aging? Isn't purposefulness part of aging now? Hasn't it always been?

Encore.org's CEO Marc Freedman likes to quote the novelist William Gibson, who said, "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed." What Gibson meant, and this is how I think about it, is that many of the elements of purposeful aging are visible today, but these are "green shoots," if you will, of a garden still to flourish. We need to make sure these shoots are nourished and grow.



For example, finding one's purpose — and here I mean what Abraham Maslow called the highest order of human needs, purpose beyond the self or purpose that is directed at the well-being of others — has always been available to us, including people at older ages. The value of having this kind of purpose as a later-life goal is

well-documented in terms of physical and mental health, including some evidence that it helps stave off cognitive decline.

But engaging to advance purpose beyond oneself isn't what we as a society have considered an essential definition of success in later life for at least a half century. And we certainly haven't made achieving such a goal easy for people in, say, the last third of their lives.

So if we want to realize the benefits of purposeful aging, for older people themselves as much for society and the issues these late-life purpose-seekers care about — that future needs to be much more evenly distributed.

What does purpose beyond the self in the second half of life look like?

Sure. I'll share two examples.

As you know, for the last ten years, I've been involved with The Purpose Prize, which in 2016 moved under the auspices of AARP. One of our Purpose Prize winners, Violet Little, was the subject of a recent [major article](#), "Recognizing people who are transformative, just later in life," in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. In 2010, moved by the plight of homeless people who had no place where they were welcome to worship, Reverend Little left behind her comfortable pew in her long-time congregation to become pastor of the outdoor ministry of the Welcome Church, where he serves those living on the street.



Another example is Warren Weems, a retired Marine, who most days joins his wife Robin, a first-grade teacher in Philadelphia, as her classroom assistant. As he says in this segment of [StoryCorps](#), he felt so blessed by the family that he has that he felt an obligation to give back.

What barriers get in the way of older people engaging in "purpose" goals?

There are many barriers. First, there is pervasive ageism — ranging from the view that older people care only about themselves (the 'greedy geezer' image) to the idea that older adults have little to contribute to solving the social ills that ail our society.

There's also the notion that older people who want to do meaningful work are just another burden to manage, that they won't be able to relate to younger people, that are going to bring old-fashioned ideas and little that's new or of value, or that they are short-timers, not in for the long haul. These attitudes unfortunately can still be found even among people in the nonprofit sector.

Even older people themselves internalize ageist attitudes, questioning their confidence or their ability to learn new things or keep up with younger colleagues.

Other barriers go beyond these destructive attitudes. New research to be published this year (based on a national survey and 100 in-depth interviews conducted by a team at Stanford University) indicates that many people are concerned their health won't allow them to achieve a major life-goal that is focused on purpose. Others are concerned that pressing obligations, like caregiving responsibilities, might get in the way, or that opportunities to make a difference might conflict with other, personal life goals like lifelong learning or travel.

Finally, while many people know they want to do something that matters, they often have no idea what it is, exactly, they'd want to do — and if they do know, few know how to find an outlet to pursue their goals.

So while there are hundreds or even thousands of stories like those of Violet Little or Warren Weems, we need millions. The Stanford research says that at least 30 percent of people age 50+ have a major life goals focused on purpose beyond the self and are doing something to move towards that goal. These new data show that high-priority life goals focused on purpose beyond the self cuts across all socioeconomic groups and educational strata. But even for the most motivated, and many, many others, the path forward is still cluttered with obstacles.

Those barriers sound significant. Can you paint for LPN-Q readers a picture of what a golden age of purpose in later life might look like and what it will take to get there?

First of all, let's imagine a future in which every child is exposed to a new norm — a dramatically different picture of later life than the images of decline or disengagement that they are exposed to today; that they interact with real-life examples of older mentors in their classrooms, schoolyards and sports fields. In this future, not only will older adults engage in these generative experiences, but children will understand that their own future can include a later-life chapter of engagement that is quite different from what children might see today.

Second, the life course in coming decades is likely to be very different. As life expectancy continues to increase, the logic of a linear path — progressing from a focus on education in youth and young adulthood, to building a family and career, to a period of relaxation and leisure in retirement, leading finally to an inevitable decline — will be transformed.

It will be replaced with something much more dynamic. We may see many people participating in educational activities with different goals at many points throughout life — perhaps starting college later, coming back to train up for a new, second or third career in their 50s, 60s or 70s. People will work throughout the life course, with multiple sabbaticals or gap years to learn, retrain or travel. Right now, neither our educational institutions nor our workplaces are oriented this way, but they will have to change to stay relevant to the needs of a different and generally longer lifespan.

Career trajectories will be different, too. With a greater understanding of the role of purpose and its benefits at all stages of life, employers will increasingly be motivated to offer employees opportunities for meaningful engagement with issues they find important. This will set them apart as employers of choice.

Many companies already recognize this with their younger, millennial employees, but relatively few (Intel, AT&T, IBM, and Michelin, among them), have a similar orientation for older employees. In the near future, though, they will begin to see that life beyond the company, aka retirement, will need to include an encore stage and they will begin providing those about to retire with both information and experiences to prepare them for second and third acts for the greater good. Financial planners and life coaches will make this an increasingly important part of their practice.

Finally, we need to imagine a re-invention of how work (paid or pro bono) itself is organized. Anne-Marie Slaughter recently talked about this on the [HBR Ideacast podcast](#) as it related to gender roles, in particular how companies view productivity and work-life balance. Changes in this domain will benefit older workers and volunteers, too. In my opinion, the nonprofit, education, healthcare, and governmental sectors all can benefit from fresh approaches that separate productivity from just working longer. This is urgently needed to create opportunities for people with a lifetime of experience and expertise to put their time and talent to maximum use.

In short, a lot will have to look different, but there's a lot of self-interest at work that leads me to be optimistic.

Encore.org has a reputation for being the incubator for innovations in how we think about and prepare for next chapters focused on purpose. What future innovations will bring about this vision?

Let me put on my William Gibson hat here. One obvious innovation might be an 'encore' version of Match.com. How cool would it be if we could fill out an online profile that told us what kinds of work, paid or pro bono, would best suit us, then showed us what was available within a few blocks or a few miles of where we live, and linked us to those opportunities.

Tie this in with an app that let us swipe right to accept (or left to decline) an offer from a group that wanted to use our encore talent in short- or longer-term engagements. Like Uber drivers and Taskers — what TaskRabbit calls its vetted community of those offering services — many people aspiring to contribute to the greater good could find opportunities that matched their skills with the need or desire for flexibility. Such gigs could at times offer modest additional income to supplement Social Security and other assets people may have put away for retirement.

Here's another idea. Many educational institutions encourage undergraduates to apply what they're learning in the classroom out in the real world — through closely supervised internships or practicums, in which a period of study typically alternates with one of work. How about a proliferation of such programs for grown-ups? We already have one such model at [Encore!Connecticut](#), offered through UConn at their Hartford and Fairfield campuses. What if every community had a low-cost way to learn about the nonprofit sector and then, experience working in a nonprofit setting.

At the end of 2016, Encore.org will launch a new prize for innovative ideas connecting or deploying encore talent in areas of social need. This is a great opportunity for social innovators of all ages, as well as design thinkers and entrepreneurs, to share their best ideas about the innovations society needs to bring about a future of purposeful, engaged aging.

Sounds great. Where can readers find out more about this new prize?

I invite *LPN-Q* readers to visit our website and sign up for our newsletter to find out more about this new prize.

What's the role of the public sector in bringing about changes that will make the future you're envisioning more likely?

There's a lot of space for public sector action to help realize this future. But it's important to realize that we don't need to invent everything anew. Programs already exist under the Older Americans Act that were initially part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. These include Senior Corps programs like RSVP and Foster Grandparents that create opportunities for older adults to contribute to their communities. All of these programs could be expanded.

What has limited them? How can they be expanded?

Because they were initially seen as programs to put dollars into the pockets of older adults at risk of poverty, these programs have a means test that limits their involvement to people living near the poverty line. But there is more than enough demand for programs like these. Variations of them could invite the older adult community to participate regardless of financial need.

Fully funding the encore elements of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act in the Corporation for National and Community Service would create even more such opportunities.

At a state or local level, resources now used to support community engagement could be redesigned to more strongly encourage older-adult involvement. State and local taxes could be restructured to provide incentives, such as a property tax relief, for older adults who volunteer in schools (a program that exists in some communities) or for organizations that use experienced adults as mentors for high-need children and youth.

Given the demonstrable health benefits of volunteering, health insurance programs that participate in the Affordable Care Act could provide discounts for older adults who regularly engage in *pro bono* work in their communities.

That's a brilliant idea. Any other great ideas?

If we were to get really bold and ambitious, we could look to the example of Singapore, whose \$3 billion Action Plan for Successful Ageing includes a President's Challenge championing a national movement of senior volunteerism, to encourage an additional 50,000 seniors to contribute their talents and experience to community development by 2030.

Any final thoughts, Jim, you'd like to share about creating a future of purposeful aging?

The future I'm talking about must not only be available to a small elite, of the healthy, well-educated and well-to-do who can afford to retire from a paying job to volunteer. Providing opportunities that meet the needs of a broad-based group will require creative thinking about what engagement means, how we value it and the messages we send about it. Frankly, it's not how nonprofits have traditionally thought about leadership or volunteering. Really understanding this and valuing the informal leadership within our communities requires us to think in new ways and create new social structures to reap the strengths of *all* experienced adults.

***Bruce Frankel** is Editor of LPN-Q, Editorial Director of Redstring, LLC, and the author of *What Should I Do With The Rest Of My Life?**