



The author with her group of friends, whose ages range from 44 to 68. From left, Denise, Ashley, Janet and Nikki.

Friends Through the Ages

The value of multi-generational friendships

BY JANET REYNOLDS

On paper we don't look as if we might have much in common: a 68-year-old writer and editor with three children in their 30s and a 12-year-old grandchild; a 55-year-old nurse with two sons in their 20s; a 48-year-old chief administrator at University of Michigan with a high school senior daughter; and a 44-year-old general manager at an international public relations and communications company who is the mother of two young children.

Yet, what began nearly seven years ago when we met as writers for an *Outlander* fandom blog has morphed into a lifelong friendship. We have been there for each other for everything from the birth of a child after a long fertility journey to the death of grandparents, a parent and a husband. We have celebrated life's successes, too, from the big — like a first-choice college acceptance — to the smaller moments like baseball teams winning tournaments. *Outlander* hardly ever comes up.

And we've done all this despite not living near each other — we hail from Connecticut, Georgia, Ohio and Michigan — and despite an age gap spanning 24 years.

As the one who literally could be the mother of at least

two of these women and who is actually closer in age to my friends' parents, I am constantly amazed Ashley, Denise and Nikki — I'm just going to call them by their first names — want to be my friends. Intellectually, I know I shouldn't be. After all, I've got a lot to offer in a friendship. But I'm so much older! Why would they want to be my friend?

The answer, they say in a recent get-together at Denise's home in Ohio, is multifaceted but boils down to this one overarching point: Age doesn't even come up on their collective radar.

"I don't even look at us as different ages," says Denise, who is 55 and has been asked to be in the bridal party of one of her 30-year-old coworkers. "We're all at different stages and lean on each other for different reasons."

"If there is magic here, it is that we are at different stages," echoes Nikki, whose daughter FaceTimed us all — the "aunties," as we're called — when we were together while opening the email to see if she got into University of Michigan (she did). "We cover the spectrum of life and there's always a well to draw from. This is where I feel comfortable if there's this thing [bothering me] and I know someone will have ideas."

"There's something to be said for being in the same stage,"

adds Ashley, the youngest of our group, “but the diversity makes this a safe space.”

Indeed this erosion of ageist thinking is just one of the many benefits of intergenerational friendships, experts say. “It’s the best win-win model we have,” says Helen Dennis, a national expert on aging and what’s sometimes called the new retirement. “There are some who say if we had more communication and relationships between and among the generations, we would not have ageism.”

That possibility makes sense, Dennis continues, because people involved in these friendships would be having positive experiences with people outside their cohort. “These experiences would be generalized as opposed to something you read or a one-off experience,” she says.

Multi-generational friendships seem to be on the rise, according to some studies. According to a 2019 report from the Barna Group, 68% of Americans say they have a close friend who is either 15 years older or younger. A quarter of those have an older friend, while 16% have a younger friend. The report notes that of those with multi-generational friendships, 27% said they have

both older and younger friends. Women are more likely to have friendships with older friends than men — 31% vs. 19%. A 2019 AARP survey echoes much of the Barna Group’s research. That report also notes that multi-generational friendships can come from work (26%), the neighborhood (12%), religious practices (11%) or mutual friends (10%).

“The fact that someone is from a different life stage or age makes it more interesting,” Dennis says. “It’s not same-old, same-old.”

“The basic elements of friendship are that you really like each other. The relationship is enriching. Honesty and caring

and being a resource to one another — could you have that same conversation in your life stage? Yes, but the younger or older may come with a different experience,” she adds. “The older adult can be an inspiring force and the younger generation has a message for us all in perhaps focusing on the simpler things in life. Being exposed to different experiences can be life-enhancing for the older adult.”

And that, in turn, is one reason experts suggest that these kinds of friendships also have an additional potential upside for those who are the older ones in the friendship: healthier aging.

Research shows that remaining socially connected helps older adults have better physical and psychological outcomes. “The research is very strong,” says Dr. Mary Gallant of the School of Public Health at the University at Albany. “It’s very important to retain friendships and social engagements of all kinds.”

Unfortunately, Gallant says, decreased social engagement is far too often a normal part of aging. “Either your own physical health or physical functioning impedes participation in social events, or your own social network changes as a spouse, partner, or friends have health problems or they die so the size of the social network shrinks,” she says. “Intergenerational friendships are one way for older people to counter that natural phenomenon.”

And the benefits of these go beyond the mere friendship itself, Gallant says. “For older adults they can provide access to a different social network. They can open up different avenues for social engagement, expand someone’s social network and connect older people to another whole set of people, potentially.” Friendships outside their standard cohort can also help older adults keep abreast of newer technologies and ways to learn new things.

Gallant agrees with Dennis about the long-term potential impact of these kinds of friendships on societal views around aging. “It’s a way to reduce and counteract some of the negative stereotypes about age and aging,” she says. With today’s families less likely to live near each other, Gallant says, “intergenerational friendships provide a way for younger people to understand more about aging and older adults. They’re friends with an older person rather than having dinner with their grandmother every Sunday so younger people can learn about what aging is and isn’t.”

“Older adults in this country in particular are marginalized,” Gallant continues. “Their contributions aren’t recognized and as a result a common experience is to feel invisible, to feel sort of ignored. It’s all tied up with ageism and stereotypes. Intergenerational friendships can potentially counteract that.” ■

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