

# STAY.

One in three senior citizens in America lives with chronic loneliness: the persistent absence of being seen, heard, and valued.

These are people who have raised families, crossed oceans, and survived world wars—but now, with wrinkles neighboring their eyelids, and experience garnishing their souls, these changemakers are deemed irrelevant, burdensome, and outpaced by progress. For centuries, societies relied on elders as stewards of memory. In many Indigenous communities, survival itself depended on oral storytelling, where wisdom passed from elder to child preserved history, values, and identity. Today, in a culture that conditions youth to learn almost exclusively through screens, spoken knowledge is replaced by searchable answers. Bridging the gap between youth and the elderly is essential to restore fulfillment to seniors, while offering young people perspective and wisdom.

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*Powdered sugar. Custard-filled dough. A little boy gawks over gooey chocolate chip cookies behind glass.*

*The shop bell chimes.*

I was sitting at the corner table in Torrance Bakery, halfway through my muffin, when an elderly Japanese woman sat beside me, pastry in hand.

In just a matter of minutes, I had learned about much of her childhood as a farmer's daughter in Japan. She told me about cooking meals for her family and spending hours playing with *kendama*, a Japanese wooden-ball toy. But our conversation quickly shifted tone when she mentioned a particularly vivid memory:

At just seven years old, Miyoko was working in the fields alongside her younger brother, harvesting rice through the traditional *komekari* method—cutting stalks by sickle, bundling them, and laying them out in the sun to dry. Suddenly came a blinding flash and deafening roar. Tugging her brother toward a nearby cave, Miyoko was nearly knocked unconscious by the rocks fiercely bouncing off her shoulders. When the cave collapsed, they were buried under thousands of pounds of rubble. It should have killed them—and yet, the impact shielded her from the deadly radiation outside. Her quick thinking and bravery had single-handedly *saved their lives*.

Miyoko was a Hiroshima survivor.

In that moment, I realized how easily I could have missed her remarkable story and lesson if I'd simply chosen to brush her off—if I had decided that the space between our ages and cultures was too wide to cross.

She mentioned wanting a cake from the bakery for her upcoming birthday, and together we discovered that we were born on the same day, some 70 years apart. Miyoko, a World War II child born in Japan in the late '30s, and I, a teenager who'd lived in Torrance my entire life, suddenly felt like soul sisters. Our coincidence *proves* that storytelling has the power to bridge generations.

The truth is, the elderly are our living archives of experience and history! Yet, I've noticed how often seniors are overlooked. When their attempts at conversation are traded by the youth for glowing, intoxicating screens, teens miss out on meaningful lessons. Too often, our seniors are treated as if they've finished contributing to the world—when in reality, they have a *lot* left to share with society.

I've witnessed this most clearly at Torrance's Bartlett Senior Center, where I volunteer on Senior Tech Days to assist seniors with navigating their phones and laptops. But I've learned that technology is rarely the real reason they attend—most seniors show up simply because they want someone to *talk to*.

As I troubleshoot forgotten passwords or explain how to take screenshots, I get to hear each senior's story: from working at Disneyland in the '60s, to rebuilding a Fiat-850 from scratch, each retired engineer, teacher, or business owner has lived a life full of ingenuity and accomplishment. Their stories teach lessons about employing empathy and diligence, which continuously inspire the courage to pursue my *own* passions. The more time I spend at the Senior Center, the more I realize how much youth miss out on when we fail to engage with the elderly. Moreso, we forgo an opportunity to help them feel valued as they navigate a world that so frequently alienates them.

This is why intergenerational unity matters so deeply. In a city like Torrance, rich with cultural diversity and inspiring histories, older and younger generations share neighborhoods but rarely share stories. When immigrant elders—in particular—are ignored, we lose access to the remarkable lessons they carry. Taking time to connect with seniors offers young people wisdom that cannot be condensed into *WikiHOW* articles or *ChatGPT* threads.

When youth choose to engage—at bakery tables, senior centers, or anywhere in between—*both* generations benefit. Seniors regain visibility and purpose, whilst youth inherit a clearer understanding of where they come from and who they are becoming. We must realize that *every* person, regardless of age or origin, carries something worth sharing.

All it takes is to sit beside them, lend an ear, and hear their story.

To *stay*.