

[Primary Menu](#) ▼[Search](#) ▼

# ChangingAging™



with Dr. Bill Thomas

## Exploring Life Beyond Adulthood

You are here: [Browse: Home](#) ~ *The New Story of Aging*

### **The New Story of Aging**

Published by **Beth Baker, ChangingAging Contributor** on January 6, 2016 | [Leave a response](#) | [Edit](#)

#### Houston Agency Turns the Page on its Traditional Approach—

#### Their “New Story” Offers Elders Opportunities for Growth



Before Estella Anderson, 84, began coming to a day program in 2014 run by **Sheltering Arms Senior Services** in Houston, Texas, she was depressed and lonely. She stayed in her nightgown all day, watching television and doing word puzzles. “I was a shell of a person,” she says.

Nevertheless, when her daughter suggested she attend the seniors day program, Anderson was incensed. “I thought they were trying to get rid of me,” she recalls.

But by the second week of coming to the Sheltering Arms program, Anderson was hooked. She now does things she would have never thought to try on her own, “and this is absolutely wonderful,” she says. From delivering gifts to school children, to taking theater classes and acting as the center’s unofficial greeter, Anderson is stretching and learning. “I’m so



Estella Anderson

glad this is a part of my life,” she says.

The day program that she attends serves people with cognitive challenges, one of many services offered by Sheltering Arms, a division of **Neighborhood Centers, Inc.**, a not-for-profit community

development organization. Sheltering Arms operates 11 senior centers in the Houston area, annually serving 2,500-3,000 adults over 60.

Sheltering Arms had been a traditional social service provider for decades, explains director Jane Bavineau. But in recent years it struggled financially. In hindsight, Bavineau says, **“When we raised money and talked about our clients, we were supporting a message that said aging really sucks.”**

In 2011, Sheltering Arms merged with Neighborhood Centers. That changed everything.

As one of her first tasks, Bavineau presented “a fabulous Power Point to the board about how horrible it is to get old,” she recalls. “The CEO said, ‘you need to tell a new story about aging, and how you’re going to figure it out is to utilize the Appreciative Inquiry approach and you’re going to talk to older people about what they’re doing and what’s good about it.’”

Bavineau’s team went on to interview 64 older people about their lives. What they heard transformed not only Sheltering Arms’ communications strategy but the programs they operate. Their “New Story” approach has shifted the emphasis from sympathy for older people to support of their goals, says Bavineau, including creating “a whole boatload of

opportunities for our clients to give back.”

## Reframing the message

Sheltering Arms’ experience is an example of the reframing of our cultural views of aging, a trend that is happening around the country. For decades, groups such as the Pioneer Network and Dr. Bill Thomas’s Eden Alternative argued that being old does not mean we stop growing. Now that message is being fueled by major players in the field of aging. Eight leading organizations, among them AARP, the Gerontological Society and the American Society on Aging, have commissioned the nonprofit FrameWorks Institute to conduct ongoing research on how aging is perceived in the United States and how that perception might be transformed.

In a 2015 FrameWorks report *Gauging Aging*, the authors identified key communications challenges that need to be overcome in order to effect deep cultural change. These challenges include:

- Negative views that perceive the aging process “as an obstacle to be overcome or an enemy to be vanquished”;
- Individualism that attributes health aging to individual choices and fails to acknowledge the importance of social supports and systems;
- Lack of understanding of demographic change, which keeps the public from seeing both the urgency of addressing aging issues and the opportunities of having an older population;
- **Ageism**, with little public understanding of the impact of discrimination; and
- Fatalism about society’s ability to find solutions to challenges of aging.

It’s not only the **media** that conveys these negative messages, FrameWorks found. As Bavineau realized, aging advocates and service providers themselves often foster grim stereotypes in their funding appeals and publications.

To create a compelling narrative on the aging process, advocates need to both craft new messages and effectively disseminate them across all sectors that work on aging issues. “What we’re really talking about is changing cultural understanding which is a tall task,” said FrameWorks vice president for research Nat Kendall-Taylor in a webinar, “**Reframing Aging.**”

Creating a more positive—and accurate—narrative, according to the Frameworks report, “will require developing a set of strategies and tools that can reframe people’s understandings of the aging process and of older Americans—so that aging is understood as both a personal and a shared resource and opportunity, and so that older Americans are viewed as central rather than marginal participants in our collective life as a nation.”

Among the recommendations: do not use images that “otherize” older adults or that contribute to a crisis mentality (as in “silver tsunami”).

Instead, focus on systemic solutions and “paint the future as a time for potential change and improvement.”

### **Changing the message changes relationships**

Under the guidance of Neighborhood Centers, Sheltering Arms reached many of the same conclusions as FrameWorks. Take the program attended by Estella Anderson. “Our old approach was very similar to a lot of social service agencies—older adults are broken and we need to go in and fix them, we need to be their saviors, we need to help them,” explains Katie Scott, Director of Sheltering



Arms' Dementia and Caregiver Support Services. "When we embarked on this New Story, we realized we don't need to save them, we need to support them in exploring what they want—what makes them excited, what makes them thrive."

Although the day program long offered exercise classes and cognitive stimulation, the staff now tries things they would have once not thought possible for many of their clients, including poetry classes and current events discussions. A new theater group is proving quite popular.

"Performing arts is a wonderful way to get to emotions, it does not matter what their cognitive level is," says Scott. Many enjoy participating in the theater exercises, such as practicing laughing or breathing. "Some may just want to be in the room, and that's okay," she says.

Sheltering Arms now prioritizes opportunities for their clients to give back.

Scott's program has monthly community service projects, in which the elders collect canned food for **hunger** drives, assemble hurricane preparedness kits for those who are homebound, or decorate lunch bags for youngsters receiving Meals on Wheels.



One of Anderson's favorite activities was delivering gifts to third graders, most of them recent immigrants, at a nearby school. She and other clients decorated bags with each child's name and filled them with supplies.

"[The children] were delighted," says Anderson, "but not as delighted as I was to be around them."

Other Sheltering Arms senior centers are also getting creative about their offerings. "Now we're looking at the talents and strengths of the seniors and how we can holistically address their interests," says

Meggin Lorino, Director, Neighborhood Based Senior Services. For example, teens come to the centers to assist older clients in using the Internet and social media. One site will conduct a YouTube competition, inspired by a humorous video produced by **Cyber Seniors**.

At another center, a group of clients who enjoy doing arts and crafts teaches what they love to school children. “They’ve all developed really good relationships, even when there’s a language barrier,” says Lorino. “It’s a really good bonding experience.”

Spending just a few thousand dollars, one center revamped a “sitting room” into an arts and crafts studio, stocking it with supplies. Some clients who were accomplished quilters and seamstresses made coats for staff members on appreciation day. A goal for 2016 is to open a consignment shop for the crafters to sell their creations, earning some money for themselves and support the arts program. “That’s emblematic of the New Story,” says Lorino. “Now we’re looking at how to take it to the next step.”

No related posts.

**POSTED IN AGE OF DISRUPTION, CHANGINGAGING  
TAGGED NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS, REFRAMING AGING, SHELTERING ARMS**

Article written by **Beth Baker, ChangingAging Contributor**



Press 2014).

Beth Baker ([www.bethbaker.net](http://www.bethbaker.net)) is a freelance writer who specializes in aging issues. Her most recent book is *With a Little Help from our Friends—Creating Community as We Grow Older* (Vanderbilt University