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Boomers Hit New Self-Absorption Milestone: Age 65

By DAN BARRY

In keeping with a generation's fascination with itself, the time has come to note the passing of another milestone: On New Year's Day, the oldest members of the Baby Boom Generation will turn 65, the age once linked to retirement, early bird specials and gray Velcro shoes that go with everything.

Though other generations, from the Greatest to the Millennial, may mutter that it's time to get over yourselves, this birthday actually matters. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), for the next 19 years, about 10,000 people "will cross that threshold" every day — and many of them, whether through exercise or Botox, have no intention of ceding to others what they consider rightfully theirs: youth.

This means that the 79 million baby boomers, about 26 percent of this country's population, will be redefining what it means to be older, and placing greater demands on the social safety net. They are living longer, working longer and, researchers say, nursing some disappointment about how their lives have turned out. The self-aware, or self-absorbed, feel less self-fulfilled, and thus are racked with self-pity.

So, then, to those who once never trusted anyone over 30: Raise that bowl of high-fiber granola, antioxidant-rich blueberries and skim milk and give yourself a Happy Birthday toast.

“The stork’s 1946 diaper derby left a controversy today that rocked the cradles from coast to coast,” The Associated Press reported 65 years ago. “The maternal question of the moment was: Who was the first baby born in the new year?”

The wire service named several contenders, from a newborn girl named Darleen in Los Angeles to a baby boy named James in St. Louis — to the infant identified only as “the son of Mr. and Mrs. Aloysius Nachreiner, of Buffalo.” Readers of that news item could not help wondering:

What is to come of this son of Buffalo? Who will he be?

The Nachreiner boy, along with these other bundles of innocence, were the very first of what has come to be known, rather graphically, as the “pig in the python.” After the travails and absences of the **Depression** and World War II flattened the birthrate, the promise and prosperity of the postwar years created a sharp rise in births that lasted from 1946 until 1964, when the popularity of **birth control** pills helped stem the tide.

Ascribing personality traits to a bloc of 79 million people is a fool’s endeavor. For one thing, people born in 1964 wouldn’t know the once-ubiquitous television hero Sky King if he landed his trusty Songbird on their front lawns, just as people born in 1946 wouldn’t quite know what to make of one of Sky King’s successors, the big-headed H. R. Pufnstuf.

For another, the never-ending celebration of the hippie contingent of boomers tends to overshadow the Young Americans for Freedom contingent. After all, while some boomers were trying to “levitate” the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War, other boomers were fighting in that war.

Steven M. Gillon, the author of “**Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever and How It Changed America**” (Simon & Shuster, 2004), warns against generalizing about baby boomers, especially when it concerns politics. Still, he says, the boomer generation, of which he is a member, clearly changed our world. Here’s a simple generalization — that is, explanation — of how:

Previous generations were raised to speak only when spoken to, and to endure in self-denying silence.

But baby boomers were raised on the more nurturing, child-as-individual teachings of Dr. [Benjamin Spock](#), and then placed under the spell of television, whose advertisers marketed their wares directly to children. Parents were cut out of the sale — except, of course, for the actual purchase of that coonskin cap or [Barbie](#) doll.

“It created a sense of entitlement that had not existed before,” Mr. Gillon said. “We became more concerned with our own emotional well-being, whereas to older generations that was considered soft and fluffy.”

The boomers may not have created rock 'n' roll, but they certainly capitalized on its potential to revolt against parents. And they may not have led the civil rights movement, but they embraced it — at least, many of them did — and applied its principles to fighting for the rights of women and gay men and lesbians. They came to expect, even demand, freedom of choice; options in life.

“But the pig has moved through the python, and is moving to the final stage,” Mr. Gillon said. “And we won't describe what that stage is.”

Here is an attempt: retirement, old age, then a release to a place where the celestial Muzak plays a never-ending loop of the Doobie Brothers.

About 13 percent of the population today is 65 or older; by 2030, when the last of the baby boomers are 65, that rate will have grown to 18 percent. In addition to testing the sustainability of entitlement programs like [Social Security](#), this wholesale redefinition of old age may also include a pervading sense that life has been what might technically be called a “bummer.”

A study by two sociologists, Julie Phillips of Rutgers University and Ellen Idler of Emory University, indicates that the [suicide rate for middle-aged people](#), notably baby boomers without college degrees, rose from 1999 to 2005. And Paul Taylor, the executive vice president of the Pew Center, summed up a recent survey of his generation this way:

“We’re pretty glum.”

This gloominess appears to be linked to the struggling economy, the demands of middle age and a general sense of lofty goals not met by the generation that once sang of teaching the world to sing in perfect harmony, and then buying it a Coke.

No one person can represent all 79 million members of a generation. But perhaps one person can remind us of the small epiphanies and private pains that define all generations.

Remember the son of Mr. and Mrs. Aloysius Nachreiner, the first baby born in Buffalo in 1946, thus making him one of the country’s first baby boomers? Well, his parents named him Aloysius, too — though he was often called Butch.

His father was a bagger at a feed mill; his mother raised their three children in the first floor of a rented duplex. When he was 5 years old, he was blinded in his left eye during a snowball fight with his friend Billy. He liked watching Roy Rogers and Howdy Doody on the family’s round, black-and-white television, and rooted hard for Mickey Mantle.

Al, or Butch, graduated from a vocational school with plans to become an auto mechanic, but that never happened. He wound up making his career as a setup man and press operator for a folding box company.

He married an older woman named Alice, a widow with seven children who loved Elvis Presley. They had two daughters, but one died of **crib death**. They bought a house in a Buffalo neighborhood nicknamed Iron Island because it was surrounded by railroad tracks.

He played fast-pitch softball for many years, pitching for who knows how many bars and taverns, but gave it up a few years ago because his knees would hurt for days after a game.

Two years ago, two days after their 40th wedding anniversary, his Alice died, after a long struggle with **Alzheimer’s disease**. She left him with two dozen grandchildren and a half-dozen or so great-

grandchildren. “As long as they all don’t come over at once, it’s all right,” he says, laughing.

Mr. Nachreiner still works, making boxes from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., five days a week. In his free time, he roots for the hapless Buffalo Bills, uses his computer — “though I’m not very good at it” — and, when not visiting family, relaxes at home with his Jack Russell terrier, Trixie, where a portrait of Elvis hangs on the wall.

He does not devote much time to pondering the traits of his generation, or his status as an early baby boomer, or even the fact that come New Year’s Day he will turn 65. What he says of it all is what all those baby boomers behind him hope to say one day:

“I made it.”

Jack Begg contributed research.

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