

## **Gifted elders: A forgotten group**

(A shorter version of this article is published in *Mensa World Journal*, May 2016)

*Noks Nauta, Ellen Fiedler, Terry Friedrichs<sup>1</sup>*

*SENG,<sup>ii</sup> through its Gifted Elders Initiative, dedicates itself to learning more about, and thus helping, those senior citizens who have nurtured so many gifted children and grandchildren and who have been instrumental in bringing the world's dreams into reality.*

We know that gifted children remain gifted as adults and also later in life. Fiedler (2015) describes six stages of giftedness in adulthood. In Late Adulthood (ages 65 to 80), she calls them Actualizers, bright adults who are on paths of self-actualization and of helping others actualize their goals and dreams. Cruisers (age 80 and beyond) use minds that are intensely active regardless of physical changes. They know who they are and what they want in their remaining years.

The giftedness of many gifted elders, however, has never been recognized and remains unseen. For gifted elders, knowing about giftedness and becoming aware of their social and emotional needs can help them live happier and more fulfilling lives.

### Experiences of gifted seniors

Not much is written about gifted seniors' social and emotional or other needs. However, noted educator Annemarie Roeper wrote about her own experiences as a gifted elderly person when she was more than 80 years old. (Roeper, 2007, Roeper, 2011).

Gifted older people may only discover their giftedness late in life, or they may never find out that they are gifted. They may realize that they are "different" and feel "different." (Fiedler, 2015, pp. 174-175) Some of them have developed small problems; others have much bigger difficulties. In private life or at work, they sometimes experience psychiatric illnesses. (See, for instance, Nauta & Corten, 2002; Nauta & Ronner, 2013.) However, the issues that confront them may be misdiagnosed as pathology or may actually require a dual diagnosis (Webb et al., 2005).

This pattern exists also later in life. In the last phase of their lives, we see many gifted seniors withdraw from other people because there are fewer and fewer people left to talk with who are at the same levels of perception and thinking. The normal activities that are offered to their age group, like bingo or crafts, are quite unappealing to them. This often makes them feel lonelier than they need to be or would prefer to be.

Two studies on more and less purpose-filled gifted seniors were recently conducted in The Netherlands. One was on the needs of gifted seniors (Bouwman & Geertsma, 2015). Another dealt with the relative knowledge of giftedness in people working in elder care (Aryee, 2015). These studies help to develop our understanding of issues surrounding older gifted adults and their caregivers.

### Recognition and attention

Recognition of giftedness in older adults really helps. For people who are unfamiliar with giftedness, a practice-based list of characteristics can be very helpful (IHBV leaflet, English version 2014).

In the Netherlands in 2011, we started to ask for attention for gifted elders. A nationwide newspaper published an article. After that, some people working in care facilities asked the advice of the Gifted Adults Foundation, and we published a leaflet, as well as an article in a journal on aging (Nauta &

Jurgens, 2012). In several places in the Netherlands, there are initiatives now in which activities are offered for bright seniors who have interests other than those of average elders: a cultural café, a scientific café, and a program featuring documentaries.

With money from the Mensa Foundation in the Netherlands, a professional author wrote two portraits of gifted seniors. An English translation of the portraits will soon be posted on the website *IHBV.nl*. A film documentary about gifted elders in the Netherlands is also planned.

### The care for elderly gifted people

In facilities for the care of elderly, more and more attention is now given to tailor-made care. Not everyone is average. In the Netherlands, for instance, the special needs of elderly people from other cultural backgrounds and from the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community are now acknowledged and addressed. In that climate asking for attention for gifted elderly people can also be positively welcomed in some places, although advocacy for gifted seniors is still in a very early phase. As we give information to professional caregivers, we find that they are curious to know more about gifted people, and that they also recognize the characteristics of giftedness in some of their clients. Nowadays, elderly people in general are seen as more autonomous than one or two decades ago. That perception helps the climate to be more appropriate.

Gifted persons who have cognitive impairment, mainly because of dementia, form a specific group. We know from experience that cognitive deficiencies are compensated for and are masked by high intelligence, and this compensation often results in later diagnoses. Gifted people with dementia are still gifted people, even when intelligence assessments result in low scores. Giftedness is in the person and in that person's history. Gifted seniors need to do more than simply sit around with the same daily intellectual stimuli, if they are to maintain their cognitive capabilities (or to slow the erosion of those strengths). They need structured and enjoyable recall of pleasant memories and practice, if they wish, with their strong intellectual skills. They may need attention to social and emotional needs that go along with the diminution of their strengths and the erosion of their identities. Finally, they may benefit from nurturing of emerging creative skills (Friedrichs, 2013).

### Sharing experiences all over the world

It would be interesting to collect case studies and vignettes, from all over the world, in which gifted seniors tell us how their needs are being fulfilled or not. These examples may help us (and other researchers) to convey to gifted elders from varied backgrounds how these seniors can better meet their needs, in either residential homes or independent-living or care facilities. The authors warmly invite readers to submit these stories!

### References

Aryee, R. (2015). *Qualitative study on the knowledge about gifted seniors*. English abstract, see: <http://ihbv.nl/international/english/publications/>

Bouwman, M. & Geertsma, M. (2015). *Unknown intelligent: The social and emotional needs of gifted elders*. English abstract, see: <http://ihbv.nl/international/english/publications/>

Fiedler, E. (2015). *Bright adults. Uniqueness and Belonging across the Lifespan*. Tucson, Arizona: Great Potential Press, Inc.

Friedrichs, T. P. (2013). *Mother: A gifted life with dementia*. A presentation to Annual Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted National Convention, Denver, Colorado, July 15.

IHBV. (2014). *Not everyone is average. Gifted seniors less lonely through recognition*. Translation of leaflet published in Dutch in 2012. See: <http://ihbv.nl/international/english/leaflets-eng/>

Nauta, N. & Jurgens, K. (2014). *Gifted senior citizens, a forgotten group?* Translation into English from a Dutch article: Hoogbegaafde senioren: een vergeten groep. *Gerōn* 14(2012) #4: 35-38. English translation on <http://ihbv.nl/international/english/publications/>

Nauta, N. & Ronner, S. (2013). *Gifted workers, hitting the target*. Maastricht: Shaker-media. (Originally in Dutch, 2007.)

Roeper, A. (2007). Growing old gifted. In A. Roeper & A. Higgins. *The I of the beholder* (Chapter 12). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press. [<http://www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/growing-old-gifted/>]

Roeper, A. (2011). *Beyond old age: Essays on living and dying*. Berkeley, CA: Azalea Art Press.

Webb, J. (2013). *Searching for meaning: Idealism, bright minds, disillusionment, and hope*. Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Webb, J.T., Amend, E.R., Webb, N.E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P. & Olenchak, F.R. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults*. Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.

### The authors

*Noks Nauta* (1947), Ph.D. is an M.D. and a psychologist. She detected her own giftedness when she was 52 and became a member of Mensa. She co-founded and works for the Gifted Adults Foundation, an organization that wants to improve the living climate for gifted adults. The IHBV works professionally but mainly with volunteers. See: [www.ihbv.nl](http://www.ihbv.nl) and [www.noksnauta.nl](http://www.noksnauta.nl). Contact: [noksnauta@ihbv.nl](mailto:noksnauta@ihbv.nl)

Some presentations on gifted seniors in pdf: <http://ihbv.nl/international/english/presentations-eng/>

*Ellen D. Fiedler* is a Professor Emerita of Gifted Education from Northeastern Illinois University and has a Ph.D. in Counseling and Guidance and an M.S.E. in education. She has been a Gifted Program Coordinator and a State Consultant for Gifted. She is the author of *Bright Adults: Uniqueness and Belonging Across the Lifespan* and wrote chapters on gifted adults in *Off the Charts: Asynchrony and the Gifted Child* and in *Living with Intensity*, as well as publishing dozens of articles in professional journals. Ellen regularly presents at state, national, and international conferences, keynoted the first international symposium on adult giftedness, and has done a number of webinars on gifted students and adults. Contact: [ellenfiedler@comcast.net](mailto:ellenfiedler@comcast.net)

Terry Friedrichs, Ph.D., Ed.D., has been a teacher, researcher and activist for decades with the gifted GLBTQ, twice-exceptional, and high-potential elder populations. He presently directs Friedrichs Education, a Minnesota center for support, study, and education of these groups. For the past seven years, he has worked closely with physicians, nurses, and caregivers to stimulate the cognition of his mother, who has vascular dementia. He currently coordinates SENG's Gifted Elders Initiative. Contact: [tpfriedrichs@stthomas.edu](mailto:tpfriedrichs@stthomas.edu)

---

<sup>i</sup> The three authors form the SENG Gifted Elders Initiative.

<sup>ii</sup> SENG: Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted, [www.Sengifted.org](http://www.Sengifted.org)