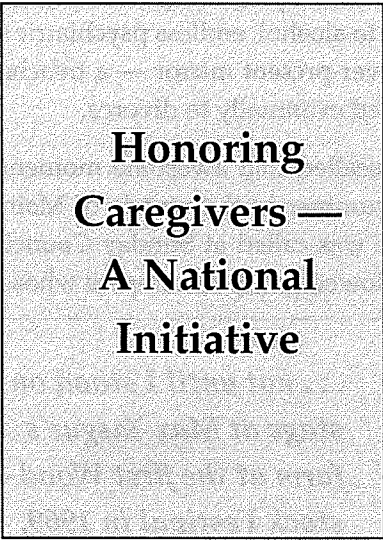


Five years ago, I was jobless, penniless, homeless, and heavily in debt from a divorce. I did not know if I would ever buy food again, fill up my gas tank, or help my last son through high school and college. How, I wondered or could I, ever strike out on my own. I was crushed, feeling very much like “Elder Road Kill” — graying, cast aside, worthless.

I called friends to see if they could put me up, in exchange for services that I could do. Two days after I called him, my minister asked if I could “house sit” for two weeks while a legal dispute was settled about a will. I said yes, feeling that if I didn’t, my last strategy would be to push a shopping cart down Van Nuys Boulevard looking for recyclables.

When he handed me the keys to a three-bedroom, two-bath home in Mission Hills — aptly named!— pastor Larry Keene said: “Sometimes you have to move just one stone.”



**Honoring  
Caregivers —  
A National  
Initiative**

I set about to find out what he meant. That journey leads me here.

### **Following a Trail of Memories**

Reaching back, I tried to launch my future by reconstructing significant events in my past. I recalled that I had been brought up by elders: camp counselors and professors at boarding schools who replaced my own dysfunctional family. My Dad was always trying to cope with my mother's addictions to alcohol, endless psychiatric sessions, and her ever-present mirror — a treacherous trifecta that led eventually to divorce.

I recalled that awesome moment, at twilight one summer in the woods of Maine, when my name was called at Sunday Council Fire to join a hallowed group of campers whose community

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behavior exemplified the ideals of citizenship. I was just nine. Wasn't I still a concerned citizen a half century later even though people wouldn't hire me because of my gray hair?

I remembered being in a movie theater several years later. I watched the movie, *Kon-Tiki*, with explorer Thor Heyerdahl aboard a balsa raft on his way from South America to Polynesia after World War II. I knew then that I wanted to be like that man on the screen, but more: I wanted to explore the geography of the human spirit.

I agonized again over the time I had crashed at ninety miles an hour, almost killing three friends and myself on a lonely road one July evening. Why had I, why had we all, been spared death?

I reached back to that time when, at eighteen, I was a freight-train-riding hobo and hitchhiker in my spiritual home of Wyoming. I read the Sunday comics to a group of illiterate day laborers in a communal bunkhouse. Though we were all nervous, looking for heavy equipment work the following day, I felt exhilarated. I did not realize I was taking my first step as a storyteller.

I recalled times with my mother — when she was sober, she read to me in French to improve my ear and make me laugh — and with my father who hid with me in darkened movie theaters to avoid the bubbly, volatile wrath at home.

I heard the echo of JFK who had exhorted all of us who had just graduated from college to "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"; and saw Martin Luther King as he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial telling us his vision of the future, his promise in "I had a dream."

Still, I was totally unprepared for the one incident that transformed my life forever: the assassination of my beloved President Kennedy who was leading us to the New Frontier. On that tortuous weekend in 1963, in spite of the tears that were rending my soul, I was asked to write little announcements for the ABC television network where I was then working as a shipping clerk. I wrote "promos" that would tell our audience the next programs we would broadcast, as soon as we figured out what they might be. Working side by side with the producers, writers, and directors who were providing "live" coverage, I made new friends among these elders.

Months later, when they left ABC to join educational television, they asked me to join them. Finally, all that I had learned before became relevant; I began to work on television projects that exemplified social consciousness and civic engagement. I wasn't producing these projects, but I was learning how! My pathway to Kansas City began with these little steps. And I recalled them vehemently while my house-sitting responsi-

bilities in Mission Hills expanded from two weeks to one year.

I heard Bobby Kennedy say that he dreamed of things that never were and asked why not. But not until I stood on stage at Max Yasgur's farm at the first Woodstock Festival in 1969, did I fully appreciate the possibilities. There I was, documenting the vagaries of "Woodstock Nation," with a film crew that I had put together in just five days. And what a crew. We designed and produced one of the most extraordinary and revolutionary movies ever made. I remember thinking that if we could create a visual symbol of the tumultuous sixties in one film that defined a generation, was there anything we couldn't do?

### On Parallel Tracks

For almost thirty years, a man whom I had known in New York City had been pursuing a parallel track, making independent films with other partners. And although our paths had crossed many times, we had never worked together on a common project. When Harry Wiland came to Los Angeles, he sought me out and I helped connect him to the world I knew. Always inventive, always persistent, he represented the epitome of the entrepreneur, born of his background, coupled with his fascination for the powers of the then-burgeoning Internet.

One day, over coffee, as we were both musing over what might become our next project, Harry began to talk about his Mom and Dad. His life had been very different from my own: a tighter family, a purer singleness of purpose, a higher level of curiosity. We discovered similarities, in our own dreams, in our own pasts. Caregiving was a common bond that united us. He talked of the rough time he and his brother had endured, caring long-distance for his father in Miami who had Alzheimer's disease. I had had an equally difficult time coping with the decline and caregiving needs of my mother who chose to live out her life in Houston, not far from her sister though the two women had grown far more distant than the one mile which separated their homes. They had not

spoken for years! My mother's irascibility still flourished!

Since Harry and I had dealt with similar circumstances, not knowing what we were doing, why, we reasoned, couldn't we assemble all we did *not* know and let it comprise the essence of a national conversation we could conduct on PBS. We can form a partnership, Harry graciously offered, to see if we can mount a project devoted to caregiving. Was it possible, I wondered, to transform my chaotic struggle with my Mom's demise, a struggle that also represented my unconditional bond of love with her for all she had given me, into a nationally televised dialogue, supported by grassroots community-based outreach, website, and companion book?

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*Was it possible to transform my chaotic struggle with my Mom's demise, a struggle that also represented my unconditional bond of love with her for all she had given me, into a nationally televised dialogue?*

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That handshake with Harry, exchanged in the spring of 1999, moved the "one stone" invoked by pastor Larry Keene months earlier. The gateway to the project parted; Kansas City, among other venues, beckoned.

### A Birthing Process

Armed with a blank piece of paper, no start-up capital, and a mission, we took our first tentative steps. Over the next months of fund raising, Harry and I called, wrote, sent, emailed, and visited hundreds of people. We cajoled, pushed, held back, followed every lead, developed new ones, and turned over every stone. Hundreds and hundreds of times of times we were turned down in the first

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2.5 years. Of the more than one thousand inquiries for funding we initiated, only a score of underwriters agreed to help. They made the difference. When we stopped dialing for dollars and started producing, we had accumulated \$2.4 million.

As a result, when *And Thou Shalt Honor* was broadcast on October 9, 2002, on PBS as October's Program of Note, we had received 98 percent carriage on PBS stations, organized 1,500 community-based grassroots coalitions and 58 national outreach partners, created a PBS Companion book with foreword by Rosalynn Carter, and built an interactive website with thousands of healthcare providers searchable by zip codes. We had also conducted a national publicity campaign, produced and edited another dozen shorter films extrapolated from our intellectual capital for educational distribution, become a best-seller at the PBS store with our video, DVD, and book. The program provoked thousands of phone calls to local PBS stations, and scored higher in the ratings than most other comparable programs. In short, we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.

After the success, we were asked by many, "What Next?" How do we keep 1,500 grassroots coalitions actively engaged with the citizenry? Since PBS is the best idea stream known, we devised a series of *And Thou Shalt Honor* Caregiving and Eldercare Town Hall Meetings, a "road show" in the great tradition of the PBS *Antiques Road Show* to enable communities to percolate the caregiving issues that were important to them through local and regional PBS airings.

One day, I sat down next to Judy Bellome at the Eden Alternative conference in Myrtle Beach, I thought, as I do always, why am I next to this particular person today? I told Judy about our goals. She retorted: if you want to start a Town Hall Meeting in Kansas City, you can't do it without calling Myra Christopher at the Midwest Bioethics Center.

Midwest Bioethics Center had indeed been central to the Kansas City outreach effort for ATSH. When I returned home, I called Myra for the first time. She knew about our project, and she had worked with *On Our Own Terms* with Bill Moyers in 2000, so she was primed. Myra asked me to give her four weeks. What for? I asked. She said that she could probably get many of Kansas City's thought leaders into one room in four weeks if I would agree to address them. We picked a date.

I arrived the night before the meeting and met with a small group for wine and cheese. The next day, at KCPT, we introduced the project and talked together for several hours as people decided whether they wanted this Town Hall Meeting to take place in their community. They did, and we moved rapidly to make it happen.

Kansas City was chosen for the first town hall event, partly because the funding and the organization came together faster, and partly because we wanted to start in the center of the country where family values — caregiving is a family issue, after all — are untarnished by pressures endemic in some coastal communities.

We wanted to frame the ethical and moral debate for other locales, and, perhaps, equally as important, we wanted to invoke a historical image related to the "roots" of caring. President Harry Truman of Independence, Missouri (a stone's throw from Kansas City!), was the first president to call for a national healthcare policy in 1945. We determined that each subsequent town hall meeting would discover a similar historical event that we could weave into the beginning of each program, so that by the time we go national in Fall 2004, in Washington, D.C., we could string

these images together into one long “grassroots” sequence for the national PBS broadcast.

Once again, we called, wrote, sent, emailed, and visited dozens of people. Once again we cajoled, pushed, held back, followed every lead, developed new ones, and turned over every stone; only this time we had a steering committee of committed Kansas City leaders to help us. We videotaped the production on August 26, and KCPT aired the broadcast on September 25, extending the program by a half hour. Kansas City ought to be very proud of its accomplishment.

### **After Kansas City, What Next?**

Other cities will replicate this pattern in the months to come, including Milwaukee and Denver. Later, in 2004, we expect Town Hall meetings to be held in Los Angeles, Austin/Dallas/Houston, south Florida, Phoenix, Indianapolis, rural Kansas, Boston, New York City, San Diego, Cleveland, Atlanta, and Seattle. We will culminate in a national Town Hall Meeting in Washington, D.C. This event will be hosted through Georgetown University in Fall 2004. Our discussion will be similar but raised to the national level, and we will again air the broadcast through PBS. We may even have a national underwriter eager to be involved in many of these new venues.

Some cities have set high goals, and are reaching them, believing that identification with *And Thou Shalt Honor* will help them continue their efforts to engage their community in dialogue long after

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*We are the Woodstock  
Nation transformed into  
the Caregiver Nation —*

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the local or regional broadcast. Ample opportunities exist, therefore, for underwriters to promote their association with this grassroots community-based effort; for example, post-broadcast activities include publishing a DVD, brochures, and other

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outreach material that can be disseminated to clients, prospects, employees, and stockholders.

As we well know, we are in the affected generation; we are the Woodstock Nation transformed into the Caregiver Nation — we have more parents to care for than children. Underwriters want to reach those people. Tapping PBS and its many stations is the right way, and the inexpensive way, to go. Our town hall meetings are a way to keep the debate on national healthcare financing alive through public television and the vast, diverse community it serves.

Beyond the series of town hall meetings, Wiland-Bell Productions is developing a sequel to ATSH that will include such subjects as elder abuse, grandparents caring for grandchildren (or kinship care), adult children with special needs, financial and insurance planning, and prevention and wellness. We want to stress how communities can develop their resources, while making them better known and accessible to their respective constituencies. Watch for ATSH2.

### **Working One Community at a Time**

With Dr. Bill Thomas, founder of the Eden Alternative, we have created a new film that depicts what is happening in Tupelo, Mississippi, where the new elderhome of the future is replacing a traditional nursing home. Called The Green House Project, it shows how eldercare can be transformed one community at a time. The short film, later to be integrated into a larger one-hour PBS film about Dr. Bill Thomas and the growth of the Eden Alternative, will receive its premiere

at the National Press Club in Washington, DC on September 16.

And lastly, on the heels of the rebroadcasts of *And Thou Shalt Honor*, the Town Hall Meetings, and the sequel to *Honor*, we are developing a four-part PBS series entitled *Eldertopia*. With Dr. Bill Thomas as our guide, we will explore and document how elders have been regarded, respected or denigrated, in global cultures past and present, as we try to forge a vision for how the wisdom of elders can provide a pathway to our own future as a civilization.

### **Conclusion**

Such are the steps that brought me to Myra Christopher's doorstep at the Midwest Bioethics Center in Kansas City, the launching pad for the first of many caregiving town hall meetings that will be televised through local PBS stations across the country. Accidental? Providential? Deliberate? I will not hazard a guess. But why do we, as a society, engage in these endeavors?

Forty years ago, Martin Luther King proclaimed he had a dream. He called on our nation to grant civil rights to all those who had been disenfranchised, who had been enslaved by prejudice,

or injustice, or whim. Since that momentous exhortation for freedom, our society has moved forward on many levels. The journey to obtain true civil rights for African Americans, the disabled, women, gays and lesbians has begun. All have achieved varying degrees of progress.

Still, our elders are clamoring to be added to the list. Why has it taken so long to get them, our wisdom keepers, among those whose rights ought to be recognized and preserved by other members of society? After all, they are our mothers and our fathers who gave us birth, or name, or home.

They are the people whose hands and minds and souls have created what it is we call America; yet, we seem to have no place in our hearts or in our workplaces or in our halls of government to honor them.

Neither they nor their caregivers should fear being homeless, alone, or penniless at the end of life. Nor should you.

We know it will take more time. But we are willing to wait. We have moved "the just one stone," and Kansas City, where the first appeal for a healthcare policy went out during President Truman's term of office is central to our dream.