



Anne VanVlack (Photo: Jason Parks / Gazette Staff)

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Don't Call Me 'Dear'

Community Care for Seniors doesn't care for "elderspeak"

Community Care for Seniors' "Don't Call me 'Dear,'" campaign is a public outreach initiative that challenges ageism and stereotypes about older adults.

It's welcome in a County where a third of the population is over the age of 65. Anne VanVlack, the project manager, detailed the forms of ageism that pervade senior life in a deputation to Council earlier this month. The project is now at the tail end of a nine-month period funded by the provincial Seniors Community Grants program.

Don't Call Me Dear involved outreach events, launched a social media campaign, produced a podcast, and built a website with downloadable tools for businesses and educators to combat ageism and improve communication with older adults.

As Ms. VanVlack noted, ageism is a form of discrimination that is socially acceptable.

"It's one of the first things we notice about someone," she said. "It is a bias we might not even recognize in ourselves."

According to the World Health Organization, 50 percent of adults carry negative attitudes towards older adults. As a consequence, Ms. VanVlack

noted, “older people may be overlooked, undervalued, or excluded from decision making.”

The assumption of decline can impact individual well-being in multiple ways. “Older workers are often passed over for opportunities,” Ms. Van Vlack said. It’s also common for health care concerns to be dismissed as “just aging.”

The stereotypes are reinforced by the media. “This is a real bone to pick for me,” Ms. VanVlack said. “The media often pits different generations against each other.”

But it is in daily interactions where ageism plays out most frequently, in a parlance known as “elderspeak.”

“It’s that patronizing tone or language sometimes used with older adults,” Ms. VanVlack explained. It can be as subtle as raising the pitch of your voice, oversimplifying, or using diminutives like “dear” when addressing seniors.

Curbing ageism not only improves well-being in older adults, but helps young people view their own aging process in a more positive light.

“It shapes how they imagine their own futures,” Ms. VanVlack said. “We should hope for the opportunity to grow old.”

A major focus of the project was bridging the generation gap. One outreach event brought grade 12 students and seniors together in conversation. It broke down barriers between two groups that are routinely underestimated because of their age.

Almost 80 percent of the students said they were more likely to engage with older adults again. For their part, 100 percent of the seniors said they would do it again.

“There has been particular enthusiasm for the intergenerational conversations,” Ms. VanVlack said. PECI has already asked Community Care to hold another event.

Several of the conversations were recorded for the Don't Call Me Dear podcast, which can be found at dontcallmedear.ca, along with related articles.

A new video resource, “Serving all ages well: Unlocking the 50+ Market,” is forthcoming.

The deputation was well received by councillors; several playfully acknowledged their senior status.

“It’s a good lesson for my colleagues on respect here,” Councillor David Harrison joked.

With the major work of the project coming to a close, Ms. VanVlack hopes the resources will continue to generate learning opportunities.

“I’m really hoping it will have longer term impact.” 

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