

The missing link in the diversity issue

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Despite the politically correct popularity of promoting diversity in our society, one very large group has been blatantly neglected and left out of the discussion: the older adult population.

After reading Louisa Caran's recent letter to the editor ("Older workers face discrimination"), I felt compelled to express both my sympathy and understanding of her disgruntlement with her futile efforts to secure a job as an older worker in Corvallis. Although our lovely college town prides itself and proclaims to be a paragon of diversity, Caran's frustrating experience indicates that there is either a myopic perception of the meaning of diversity, or the city and its business community are just engaged in a self-serving ballyhoo.

According to the Oregon State Plan on Aging 2005-2009, by the year 2020, one in five Oregonians will be 60 years and older, which will have a profound impact on the social and economic makeup of communities across Oregon. At the local level, a study commissioned by the city of Corvallis

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validated statewide demographic data, prompting the commitment of the city to "adjust to changing demographic needs and demands." Considering that the dismal economic situation of millions of older adults are obliging them to delay retirement, equal employment opportunity is not only the law, but an economic necessity and a diversity issue as well.

A recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found many people over 50 reporting great difficulty finding work and feeling that their age is a factor. Ironically, an AP-LifeGoesStrong.com poll concluded that older age may be an asset at work. In fact, an article published in the front page of the Gazette-Times on Sept. 24, 2013, titled "Employers recognizing older workers for experience" states that "research has found older workers outpace younger ones in nearly every metric. ... The evidence is overwhelming that they're better." And yet, in spite of her academic training and

work experience, Caran landed only three failed interviews in 200 job applications in the span of two years.

Indeed, she has good reasons to gripe about a community that brags about its commitment to diversity while continuing to discriminate against this ballooning segment of society. Even though equal employment opportunity is the law, employers can easily bypass it, and sometimes not so subtly. For instance, one of the principal employers in town requires the candidate to provide date of birth on the online employment application form — and the process cannot be completed without it. At a time when many qualified older workers foresee having to work well beyond traditional retirement age, this is not only a violation of the law but an affront to the values of diversity that the Corvallis community touts to embrace. It reflects an unwelcome partnership of cultural hypocrisy and economic opportunity injustice.

Paradoxically, the leaders of major businesses, organizations, not to mention elected officials running the public affairs in

local and national governments, are often (much) older adults. And yet, a regular older professional with stellar credentials might find it extremely difficult to ever be employed again. Never mind their qualifications, this growing demographic should be acknowledged as a bona fide group of the diversity fabric of society in the same way we allegedly recognize the rights of African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, LGBT community, or any other minority category.

As I commiserate with Caran's disappointment in our community, I recognize that this is an issue that crosses far beyond the city limits. In any case, let there be no doubt that the older adult population belongs to a diverse demographic class in an atypical way. And since aging is a universal human experience, it would behoove us all to support and promote the rights of older citizens, for one day everyone will need that encouragement, too.

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