

Boomers: The Next 20 Years

The Changing Face of Civil Society

Boomers know their clout: they believe they will have a big impact on politics, health care, and the institutions of aging as they move through their sixties and seventies. While few of them see themselves as political activists, they are engaging in a variety of activities in what has been called “civil society,” and it is here that they are most likely to make their impact on aging and on the world at large. Their engagement with civil society will coincide with a renaissance of civil society worldwide—with new platforms for civic engagement as well as hope for new kinds of democratic processes. This intersection will likely change not only the options for aging boomers but also the role of civil society itself.

Civil Society:

The alternative road

Civil society has diverse definitions—from the narrow perspective that focuses on NGOs to broader viewpoints that include all formal and informal social organizations that are neither government agencies nor corporate institutions. Regardless of definition, however, it’s clear that civil society is an alternative to the big institutions that have shaped boomers’ lives from childhood to the present. The question is: why should we expect boomers to take this alternative route?

In the wake of the boomer activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, two important shifts occurred. First, governments began to be dismantled in favor of market mechanisms for managing societal issues, from child welfare and health to recreation and regulation. This shift coincided with the rapid growth of the self-help movement. The result was a proliferation of both commercial and non-profit avenues for boomers to patch together their social values and their complex consumer lives.

Global Society:

Local matters

In the absence of a strong national government, today’s boomers are bringing this bottom-up approach to the issues of aging with a distinct bias toward local solutions. Boomers who are “aging sustainably” work through local organizations like the church, local chapters of the New Roadmap Foundation, and local neighborhood groups. Those who are “still questing” have passionate projects focused on local issues such as local shelters for homeless women or teens. Boomers who are “coming home” or “forging family” likewise look to local community groups and

innovations to create the kinds of lives they want as they age.

At the same time, more and more of these boomers will be networked globally over the next 20 years. More will travel abroad for health care or have friends who have relocated to other countries. Even local politics will have a global face as civic groups abroad play a larger role in local politics in the United States. Local issues will be linked to global society, and local minorities will link up with people worldwide to form global majorities.

Health:

The gateway to activism

Health is where these patterns are likely to show up first. No previous generation has had more choices about how to manage their health as they age. These choices will only proliferate in the future as genetic therapies and anti-aging drugs change the landscape of aging and disease. At the same time, no generation has faced such huge health care costs dispersed across a population with such a large gap in the ability to pay those costs. Add in health uncertainties related to global climate change, and the result is the kind of volatility that can lead to large-scale political activism.

Such activism may not play out in the familiar expressions of the past. Look instead to online platforms that bring together people to share health information and experiences as a source of targeted network attacks on specific health issues and providers. You could think of these new civic actors as “Patients-Like-Me meets Moveon.org.” For a generation that sees health as its most important resource for the future, expect health to drive innovation in the civic sphere as much as in the commercial sphere.

Boomers: The Next 20 Years is a three-phase study of how baby boomers will age over the coming decades. The first phase mapped boomers’ 20-year horizon, identifying seven big stories that will shape their future. The second phase was an ethnographic study of boomers to define ten Action Types that help us understand how different boomers will make different choices as they confront the challenges of the future. The final phase uses these insights to create focused forecasts of the boomers’ world.

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Loss of faith in government

Boomers came of age in an era of entitlements, but governments and corporate society have been steadily whittling away those entitlements. The result is disappointment in government and large institutions in general. Older boomers may still expect the government can come through for them in old age. But younger boomers are looking elsewhere for their safety nets.

“I think that the federal government is becoming more intrusive in terms of surveillance of people. I think that it’s all at the same time backing away from its obligations to take care of its citizens in really fundamental kinds of ways. And so notions like, all those sorts of safety nets that are supposed to be in place for older people ... I just don’t even think they’ll be there.”

—Leanne W., age 46, university professor**

Community as health

In the decades since boomers came of age, the definition of health has been steadily expanding, and people seek health benefits from a growing array of products, services, and experiences. In keeping with this trend, aging boomers often include community in their personal health ecologies. As a health resource, community exists in that sweet spot between individual self-interest and societal well-being: by taking care of their community, boomers are also taking care of themselves.

“I always seek out community, because I know that to stay healthy, I need community.”

—Ann R., age 60, author

Boomers in service

While some boomers have seen their entire lives as an expression of service, many look toward the next two decades as a time of “giving back,” not only financially but also with their experience, skills, and time. They seek volunteer opportunities in their local communities, but they also seek options for continuing to work in lower paying jobs in the non-profit sector. For some, this civic engagement will be linked to faith; for others, it’s an avenue to deepen their commitments to communities and issues they care about.

“People of my generation, I think, are much more willing to work for a quarter, a fifth, or nothing income-wise to what they had when they were householders and, you know, to do the work that they really want to do ... I’d love to do service. I love to work, and I love to not care about money and earning money. So I’d love to do service work.”

—David M., age 54, therapist and homesteader

Creating change

Boomers have lived their adult lives in a time of rapid change, and they themselves have been the agents of much of that change. While the majority may deny that they think of themselves as boomers, they nevertheless recognize the impact of their cohort—and they expect that impact to continue. Their attitudes reveal contradictions, however. They express an almost blind faith in the ability of boomers to change today’s institutions; yet individually, they have little inclination to act out their political wills. They split by age, too. Older boomers believe that they will change the situation to their own benefit; younger boomers believe they will once again be shut out of the benefits that accrue to the older members of their cohort.

“I’m a firm believer that ... there will be great advances in all things having to do with elder care. And I’m depending on my boomer generation to push forward things like better health care for seniors, more advances. As soon as the boomers start hitting Alzheimer’s, we’re going to have a cure for Alzheimer’s. As soon as the boomers start hitting hearing problems or things associated with aging, you are going to see such great developments come out of that because they’re not going to stand for that kind of crap.”

—Sarah M., age 55, scientist and craftsperson

New civic literacies, localism, and games as policy platforms

The boomers grew up in a world of mass media extending its reach ever further to cover the globe. Civic literacies taught through these media were simple: black-and-white issues, debated by experts and luminaries, led to the ultimate expression of democracy—the national election. But today, media are proliferating, issues are fragmenting, and everyone is a potential public commentator, if not an expert. Moreover, localism is emerging as a favored strategy for everything from environmental sustainability to sustainable aging. And new digital platforms—including games that test future scenarios broadly among a worldwide population—may become the source of innovative policies and even political movements.

QUESTIONS: Will boomers adopt these new literacies and platforms as a basis for a new civil society to compensate for the perceived failures of government? And how will their personal interests shape these platforms?

New health commons and the rise of biocitizens

As health concerns—and costs—loom large in everyone's future, strategies for securing one's personal health have moved beyond government insurance and corporate benefits. Today, more people are turning to new kinds of health commons, pioneering new shared resources both online and off. Health commons are not only a way for people to self-organize to get better health information; by aggregating the experiences of millions of people from the bottom up, they are also a way for people to create health information that the health industry itself may not be able to create. They are already leveraging “smart mob” principles to create health and wellness mobs. And they are creating new kinds of biocitizens: groups of people who share common disease or genetic characteristics that bind them together.

QUESTIONS: Will boomers adopt health mobs and biocitizen groups to reform existing health care institutions and policies? Or will they experience them as parallel institutions that further fragment the health care options—and risks?

Bottom-up philanthropy

Boomers today are giving more than their World War II parents, and planning to increase that both in the short term and posthumously.¹ But the world of giving is also changing and several factors are pushing everyone toward more direct giving in smaller amounts, including new platforms for supporting trusted networks for giving and investing. Some people have called this shift “Giving 2.0,” a name that reflects the very important role that Web 2.0 and social networking tools have to play in philanthropy and distribution of money through civic groups. Social lending and social investing, bottom-up collective disaster response, and other network-based innovations are producing a new philanthropy that leverages small-scale, local, trusted networks and organizations to create new civic initiatives.

QUESTIONS: Will boomers leverage the new philanthropy platforms to create new ways of serving and giving that reconcile their local focus with the global awareness that has been cultivated by their mass media upbringing? Will their resources create a more robust civic space for both local and global problem solving?

Participatory culture, digital natives

Several trends are converging toward an increasingly participatory culture: peer-to-peer networks for production and distribution; a revitalized do-it-yourself movement that leverages collective tools to become a do-it-ourselves movement; new modes of creating political transparency, from online monitoring of campaign contributions to mobile media blogging of political events; and new smart networking and cooperative skills and practices that combine savvy use of new media with collective behaviors. Young people who have grown up with the new digital technologies—the so-called digital natives—are the lead citizens of this new culture. As they enter the institutions of adulthood, they are likely to challenge existing civic institutions and create new ones.

QUESTIONS: Will boomers integrate the tools and practices of participatory culture into their daily lives in a way that allows them to have the same influence in this expression of civic society as the younger generation?

New Civic Spaces:

Personal interests, civic platforms

The new civil society movement is a search for ways to represent diverse stakeholders in issues where traditional representative democracy has been compromised by special interests, hollowed out government agencies, or incomplete public information. Over the next two decades, this movement will leverage all kinds of social groups and networks to create new platforms for civic action.

Building on this new civic literacy, boomers will find themselves turning personal interests into action platforms, often taking advantage of “economies of coordination” provided by digital media like e-mail, SMS, social networking sites, and even microblogging networks like Twitter.

REPURPOSING SOCIAL GROUPS FOR POLITICAL ACTION

Phyllis Webber is a 52-year-old African-American woman who belongs to a knitting circle. The circle is part of a larger circle that meets evenings and weekends, sometimes in large groups, taking over an entire coffee shop and discussing topics that range from self-help-style problem-solving to institutional politics. Such groups are already being leveraged as so-called “revolutionary knitting circles” in a movement called *craftism*. This movement seeks to include a diversity of ages, genders, races, and classes in a less intense, less hostile form of social justice activism.



Source: knitting.activist.ca

So-called “revolutionary knitting circles” leverage such diverse platforms as meetup.com and senior care facilities to bring people together around handiwork and social issues.

PURSUIING PERSONAL ISSUES WITH SMALL, AGILE COMMUNITIES OF ACTION

Leanne Williams is a 46-year-old lesbian who is passionate about helping “queer” youth who are “on the streets because their parents have thrown them out of their houses after they’ve come out as queer.” She has allied herself with a small “community of faith around certain values about social justice ... racial equality ... globalization issues.” Leanne is also skilled in online communities. Over the next decade, we can expect people like Leanne to leverage their online networks to aggregate these small community actions and share tactics to make them more effective.

SMART MOBING A PERSONAL INTEREST THAT HAS BEEN POLITICIZED

Portia Martelli is a 55-year-old woman struggling with a degenerative disease that has baffled the traditional medical community. Portia has discovered a dietary solution that reverses the symptoms of the disease and is using an online Web site and video forums not only to promote the diet but to mobilize broad support for an alternative approach to the disease. As boomers innovate these kinds of solutions for their own problems, they will increasingly take advantage of “smart mob” strategies to proselytize change.

A SMART NETWORKING PROFILE

Group participation	Online communities, prayer groups, personal & professional networks, hobbies, local political groups
Collective behavior	Community projects, support local farmers, volunteering, create and share media, use social media
Online lifestyle	Blogging, maintain personal Web site, make online financial contributions, play massively multiplayer online games, use digital media to find people with similar interests
Mobile communication	Use cell phones, public wireless hotspots, mobile devices for IM, SMS, music, and video
Locative activity	GPS, location-based services
Computer connectivity	High-speed Internet connection from home, stay connected using IM, e-mail, or computer-enabled phone

In 2007, IFTF surveyed over 2000 U.S. adults about a set of behaviors related to digital technology, group participation, and collective behavior. Statistical analysis identified six key factors that define someone with a high networking IQ—and point to a new set of civic literacy skills. These skills, more prevalent among younger people today, may form the basis of new civic expressions across all generations in the next 20 years.

Localism:

New faith in local communities

Across the country and across ideologies, many boomers have lost faith in the ability of national government to address the pressing problems of the world as well as their personal problems of aging. Instead they are looking to families, friends, and local communities not only to provide the support they need as they age, but also to look after the interests of the next generations.

These attitudes will be reinforced in the near-term by the localism movement that sees local economies as more sustainable, more actionable, and more innovative than large governments. Without letting the national government off the hook, they nevertheless put their faith and energy in place-specific solutions to the problems of aging, the environment, and economic development.

WORKING THE CITY—AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Neal O'Hara, 61, worked for state government in the Northeast United States for many years, living in a suburb to raise his family. When his children left home, he and his wife decided to move back to the city where he had gone to college, reconnecting with old college friends and also starting a consulting business in local economic development. He considers these urban college friends his true retirement community and leverages connections with local colleges and universities, not only for his business as he makes plans to scale back his work; but also for bringing innovative solutions to regional social and economic development issues. He illustrates the way career-identified boomers may leverage their continuing work as well as their personal networks to provide unexpected sources of civic innovation.

LOOKING FOR NEW PUBLIC/PRIVATE SOLUTIONS

Glenn Jaskanen, 50, works for the city government in a major metropolitan area, but he lives in a rural town some two hours away. Having spent much of his life helping people in developing countries build community programs, he is a big believer in local government, which he sees as more flexible and more innovative. As he thinks about ways of caring for the elderly, he's looking to the "ability of states and local government to invent new systems, and for private groups, NGOs, or whatever you want to call them to invent new ways of caring for the elderly." But he also thinks those local governments need to "provide the oversight to make sure that people aren't getting abused by free market forces."

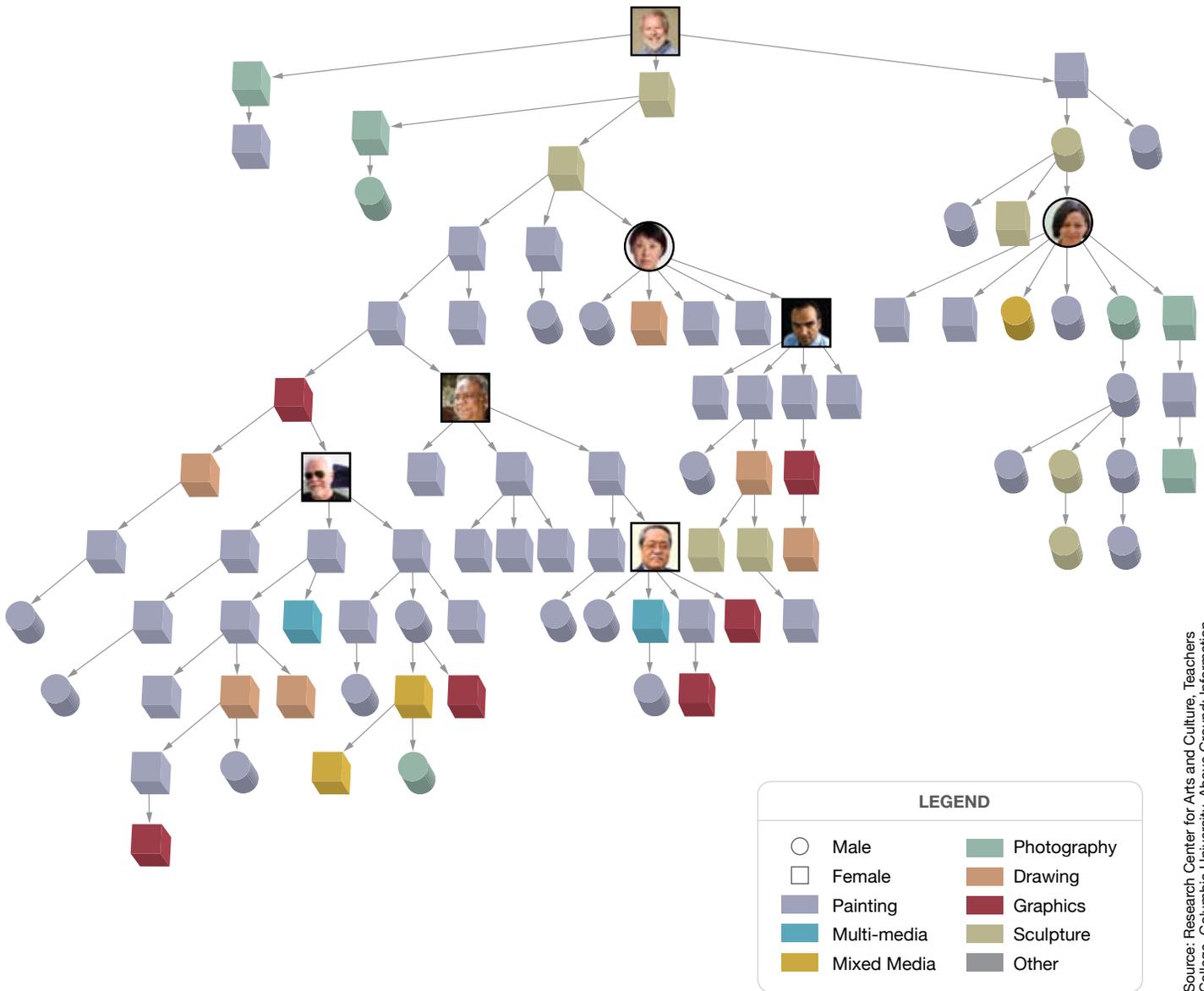
PRESERVING LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Family-oriented boomers often find their civic voices in securing the future for their children, whether by participating in organizations that have been important in their own children's lives or by literally preserving the local natural environment through restoration projects focused on native species. For example, Fred Horovitz, 60, takes his teenage daughter to local patriotic concerts to share both music and his political values with her. Hal Roemer, a 50-year-old construction trades worker who has integrated green building principles into his services, also belongs to a local arborist's organization that is working to restore local native species—with a focus on the next generation.

Hal Roemer on the environment and the next generation:

"There are times when people are going to be different. But when they're not seemingly following something that's a real value for our children, I guess the qualifier I'm looking for ... that the community seeks to make things better for the next generation ... I'm environmental I guess about things like that. Try to take care of things. And we do that at work. We're very sensitive about [chemicals] and releasing stuff, and we've all been certified ... but before that, I was still environmental."

An artist's local social habitat in New York City



Source: Research Center for Arts and Culture, Teachers College, Columbia University. Above Ground: Information on Artists III: Special Focus NYC Aging Artists, 2007.

Cities tend to have lots of “hidden” populations with strong social networks to support their residents as they age. For example, a recent study of New York City’s aging artists found that the social networks of working artists over the age of 62 are deep, with an average of 29 other artists in their social networks. These networks provide not only informal support but also potential channels for delivering city services. This network diagram shows the depth of a sample network for a project of an aging artist.

Self as Civic Space:

Open-sourcing minds and bodies

The boomers—especially boomer women—have turned their bodies into political spaces. Even leaving aside the highly charged issue of abortion rights, women’s health care and health choices became a transformative political movement under their watch. In fact, politics, economics, and culture have all converged on health and the human body/mind as a locus of both innovation and risk.

While politicians debate universal coverage, boomers are joining (and perhaps leading) the movement toward a kind of open-source health in which people see their bodies as “code” that can be shared across large populations to create innovative solutions to health. The result is likely to be a proliferation of health commons, where collective health is seen as resource for communities and individuals alike—a new civic space for managing health in sometimes surprising ways.

CREATING DNA COMMONS

Brenda Clifford is a 50-year-old woman for whom “forging family” is her primary identity. Living in a small house in a rural community, with many children and grandchildren still at home, she is connected to the global commons created by Ancestry.com. Brenda’s immediate goal is finding her biological mother and father. But sites like Ancestry.com have become a worldwide commons for information about the larger “human family.” And recently some of these sites have begun to use DNA sampling to track family trees. As more people share their DNA profiles on such sites, they will become maps of genetic relatedness, perhaps shaping everything from immigration policy to health access.



Source: www.ybase.org

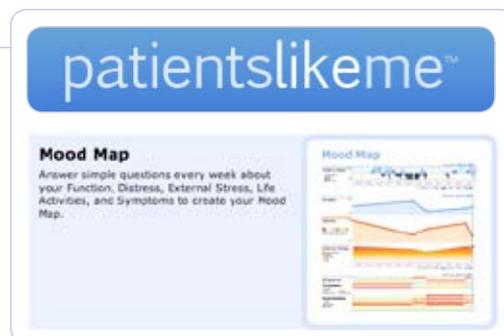
The open DNA genealogy site www.ybase.org is a DNA commons for people who want to share their genetic profiles as a means of tracking their family relationships—and larger human DNA networks. This map shows the distribution of people who have contributed their DNA and surname information to the database.

TURNING DIETS INTO POLITICAL STATEMENTS

At 51, Quentin Gomez, has already endured a series of surgeries for digestive problems and has turned to a strict diet, under the supervision of a naturopath, to manage his health. The diet has come to stand for more than just a personal health path: it represents his stance toward authority (rejection of traditional medical authorities) and community (people who share his interest in healthy, organic food). Such attitudes will intersect with food flashpoints—global concerns about food safety, escalating food shortages, and environmental impacts of food production—to drive new forms of local civic engagement.

MEDICAL SELF-CARE

Ann Rivers, a 61-year-old survivor of mental illness and brain damage caused by the treatments for her illness, embodies the boomer medical self-help movement. Finding her own solutions, she has turned her disease into a calling by writing and publishing medical self-help books, and sharing her experiences with the community through her involvement with her church and her volunteer activities. The present medical self-help movement has its roots in the 1970s, developing in parallel to small-scale publishing. It is now exploding in online health commons that will be a critical civic space as people of all ages navigate riskier health futures.



A number of online communities are emerging for sharing personal health data and experiences with treatment regimens as a means of creating a bottom-up, commons-based approach to medical knowledge and medical self-care. These are effectively new forms of civic engagement to secure personal health. The chart above is an online tool for a community of people with mood disorders to track their triggers and treatment outcomes—and share the results with each other.

About the Project:

Baby boomers are perhaps the most widely studied generation in United States history. Everything about this group has been the subject of scrutiny: their shopping behavior, media preferences, living arrangements, politics, and more recently, their views of retirement and needs for financial planning. Most of these research studies aim to define current attitudes and segment a market that dominates by its sheer size. Few research efforts, however, take a longer view.

How will baby boomers live out their lives over the next two decades—decades when the world will come to grips with unprecedented challenges and innovations? How will they navigate new ecologies of risk, highly politicized foodscapes, emerging sustainability practices, a renaissance of civil society, and a continuing personalization of faith? **Boomers: The Next 20 Years** seeks to answer these questions.

Boomer Action Types:

This project has developed a set of Boomer Action Types: ten different modes of decision-making that define boomers' strategies for seeking meaning and satisfaction in their lives. These Action Types offer important clues to boomers' orientation toward the future.

- 1. Crafting an Environment:** A blend of equal measures of creativity and control in these boomers drives a focus on crafting their personal worlds—and expressing themselves through their crafts.
- 2. Aging Sustainably:** Aging Sustainably means understanding the importance of balance between homes and environments, retirement and finances, and relationships and legacies.
- 3. Forging Family:** For these boomers who focus on forging and maintaining intimate family bonds, family is not just a given; it is something they have discovered and worked for through adversity.
- 4. Serving Faithfully:** As a central precept of their lives moving forward, these boomers follow their faith into service to others. Through service, they create value to their communities, their peers, and to themselves.
- 5. Reinventing the Self:** In a constantly changing world, these boomers adapt by remaking their bodies, interests, and skill sets—perpetual reinvention.
- 6. Rebuilding a Life:** After experiencing significant setbacks, these boomers have designed new paths that may be quite different from anything they had anticipated or planned but offer opportunities for finding satisfaction in unexpected places.
- 7. Powering Through:** What constitutes success may differ, but these boomers are all about success. Their goals are clearly defined and they're determined to achieve them and set new ones to pursue.
- 8. Lost in Transition:** In dealing with unexpected problems, these boomers have lost faith in the goals that motivated them. They are struggling to create a new framework that will provide security and satisfaction.
- 9. Still Questioning:** Work identity drives these boomers, an identity still more in the making than for most. In their quest for something in their futures, they actively distance themselves from their pasts.
- 10. Coming Home:** Returning to the childhood home gives meaning to these boomers. With an instinct for freedom, they are now exploring values of commitment, care giving, and comfort.

SOURCES:

- 1 Fidelity Gift Fund Giving Survey, 2006.
- 2 Boomers! Navigating the Generational Divide in Funding and Advocacy. Craver, Mathews, Smith and Company, 2005.

* Note: Products and services mentioned are for illustrative purposes only, no endorsement is implied.

** All names listed in this report are pseudonyms, and any similarity with the names of actual people is coincidental.

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