

Excerpt from Andrea Fonte Weaver's Acceptance Speech for the Holy Cross Alumni Club of Boston's Crusader [Alumni] of the Year Award

May 13, 2013 at The Harvard Club in Boston

Life is a journey.

Tonight, I come with a very grateful heart for the gift of this journey – for being able to travel thru life with a Loving God who seeks an intimate relationship with me. For my parents, Laura and Venanzioro, who love me so very much and gave me the tools I needed to travel thru life, especially the gift of a top-notch education at the College of the Holy Cross.

To best summarize my experience on the Mount [at Holy Cross], I quote the professors who often said, "We teach you how to think." And teach me to think – they did! I wanted to take a class with my advisor, Prof. Stephen Ainlay, so I took Intro to Gerontology and thought about the 5% fallacy. For the past 125 years, only 5% of older adults have lived in institutions like nursing homes. So I thought... maybe I could pursue a career in gerontology and not work in a nursing home. I went on to earn my bachelor's in sociology with a gerontology certificate from the Worcester Consortium and a then master's degree from Wheelock College in intergenerational studies – strategically bringing older adults and children together.

Back on the Mount, I had Prof. Rick Murphy, a religion professor, who made me think about my writing. In my junior year, he told me my writing was weak and that I needed to take a writing class. So, that summer I took a Business Writing class. For our final project, we had to submit a grant proposal with a written project to support it. During an internship with Prof. Ainlay, I learned about an intergenerational pen-pal writing program where a gerontologist taught the young students about aging. Recognizing the impact of the variety of older adults in my own life and the gifts we shared, I thought: why not have the older adults meet with the students each week and together, they can share? I wrote the framework for such a curriculum and a potential grant proposal to go with it.

My then-boyfriend (now husband), Herb, suggested that I go down to my hometown's senior center and see if they would be interested in funding it. Knowing that I had a reputation as a leader and organizer from my work in high school, they jumped at the chance to have me work at Sudbury's new center. I was there for two years, implementing a variety of programs. The curriculum stuck - and each year, I returned to teach "Bridges: Growing Older, Growing Together" to a few elementary school classrooms. In 2000, based on the enthusiasm of seniors, parents and students, Bridges went into all seventeen, fourth-grade classrooms and ran

independently of me. A few other communities purchased and implemented the curriculum, as well.

Life is a journey – and many years have passed since then...

Three years ago, Herb and I moved back to Sudbury with our own family. I talked to the assistant superintendent about Bridges and he invited me to take over coordinating the volunteers. I was so surprised to find that there were more than 125 people over the age of 55 on the volunteer roster coming from more than a dozen communities – some traveling 45 minutes to participate. These volunteers work in pairs with small groups of about 5 children. Each week for six weeks, they look at a different aspect of growing older. Class topics include Schools: Then and Now, Ethnicities, Heirlooms and Traditions, How Are We Smart: An Introduction to the Multiple Intelligences Theory and How Old is Old? In preparation for each class, the students have to interview their grandparents or another older person in their circle of love. Built on developmental theories and integrating best practices from many fields, the program is very rich... and easy to implement.

The volunteers began asking me to spread the program to more communities. I told them I was too busy with my own family and my successful website development business. Then, six women came forward independently of each other, offering to help me spread the program. By the time the fifth woman spoke with me, I recognized that perhaps God was trying to give me a message. I began to think about, pray about and research the possibilities. In the end, last spring, I put together a multigenerational and multidisciplinary board, including Jeff, and founded a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, Bridges Together Inc. I am pleased to announce that Bridges programs will be in nearly a dozen communities by the fall. Prof. Ed Thompson of Holy Cross and his students are now conducting research on how Bridges' programs affect children's attitudes about aging. I can't wait to see the results!

A crusader... in March, upon returning from the national American Society on Aging conference where Ed and I presented on Bridges, people asked me what I thought. A change had come over me. I realized that intergenerational programs are not just nice.... they are necessary... and very necessary. We live in a world that has been hit by the proverbial "perfect storm", a storm which has destroyed informal opportunities for multiple generations to have meaningful relationships with one another. As a result, the older and younger generations are not comfortable interacting with one another. Studies show that children who do not have regular interactions with older adults fear getting older. And study after study shows that our attitudes about aging affect our health and other outcome later in life. We need to provide children with these intergenerational opportunities. On the flip-side, we also have ten thousand Americans turning 65 every day – and they have limited opportunities to share their wisdom and talents with young people. What a loss. We do not have professionals ready to support the greying of

our world. Students are not entering gerontology programs and the number of such programs has dwindled. By 2050, there will be more adults over the age of 65 in this world than children under the age of 15. We are not prepared for this societal change - on any level. We need to create strategic intergenerational programs that benefit children, older adults, families and communities. In doing so, we will reap a myriad of benefits and fundamentally change our world for the better.

So, something happened in Chicago at that conference. I went to Chicago as a happy intergenerational specialist but I returned as a passionate crusader – inspired by St. Joan of Arc! Won't you join me on this crusade to change our society and to prepare our world by bringing children and older adults together again? At this point in time, we are looking for communities who are interested in implementing the Bridges program, a wide-variety of volunteers including board members, and financial donors. You can always talk with me or find out more on our website, BridgesTogether.org

Life is a journey. Tonight, I am grateful to Fr. Boroughs for continuing to carry the torch at Holy Cross, for the people who nominated me for the Crusader of the Year award and those who selected me to receive this award. I am deeply grateful for all who have walked on this journey with me. And I look forward, filled with hope, to the next phase of my life's journey.