

senior wisdom



TV producer Barbara Jandro and Judy Weitzner, right, receive a WAVE award for their TV show *Incontinence: The Dry Facts*



By the time I began this phase of my career, I had a lot of Dharma teaching under my belt and was wondering how I could help people make significant beneficial changes in their lives. I could not accept the view of aging that was being put forth in graduate school courses in gerontology – the professor actually called it “the downward spiral of degradation.” I was convinced that there was purpose and meaning throughout the life cycle, and that life experience itself helps people gain wisdom.

At the time, the newly formed Office of Aging was looking for staff. I was hired, and started a Senior Information program – a phone line for older adults, caregivers, and concerned others to call with problems and work out solutions using community resources. We answered about 1500 calls a month. I tried to impart the values of patience and compassion to my staff, and a non-judgmental attitude, when dealing with our clients.

I was assigned a graduate student to supervise. Coincidentally he had trekked in Nepal, had visited Kopan, and had met Zena Rachevsky, whom I, too, had met, along with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche in the late 1960s. The student’s project was to hold six-session classes in the community for older people on hypertension and weight and stress management. It was a great opportunity to get to know people over time and to introduce them to the effect the mind and mental attitude have on the body. We taught meditation in different forms, which our

Back in 1975, Lama Yeshe said to social worker JUDY WEITZNER, “When I see how old people ... are treated in America, it makes my heart break. If you can, do something about it.” She has spent the last 25 years working with older adults.

students really appreciated. I worked to establish programs that would embody an attitude of kindness and service and would help people through difficulties in their lives. We organized the first hospice program, an adult day care program, caregivers’ support groups, a senior volunteer program, a senior escort program and many more.

I began working with the community college to start an educational program for seniors, and started teaching classes for older adults. I was really able to integrate Dharma into my teaching methods. To work out a lesson plan, I would begin with a lam-rim topic and then think about how it could be presented. For instance, to generate bodhichitta, I would ask that the students agree to share any beneficial information they received in the course to someone else. At the end of the class we would meditate on lessons we had learned from our lives and what we would want to pass on to the next generation. Everyone would share life’s lessons and we would create a poem from the contributions of the class.

I had been following the progress of Elderhostel, an international program for education for older adults that provides an opportunity for growth and mental stimulation. I would occasionally suggest to the people at Land of Medicine Buddha in California that we should start an Elderhostel Program there. Kendall Magnussen and I worked together to initiate the first Elderhostel at Land of the Medicine Buddha. Would there be enough elders interested in Chi Gong, Feng Shui, and the Eastern and Western view of the mind, to make the program worthwhile? The program was completely filled and there was a waiting list. The program continues to this day.

For the last six years, I have been producing and moderating a television show, Senior Information Journal, about health promotion and enrichment of the lives of older adults. Once again, I try to embody some feeling of Dharma in the show. Mostly, it is pretty subtle. For instance, my sign-off line is, “Until I see you again, take good care of yourself, and, if you can, take care of those around you.”

Sometimes, the content of a show invites a fairly direct Dharma teaching. I recently did a show on spiritual care at the end of life. The guests were a Christian chaplain, a Rabbi and a Buddhist hospice nurse. We showed a clip from Sogyal Rinpoche's teaching to illustrate the Buddhist perspective. My award-winning show was called Incontinence: the Dry Facts, trying to say, "incontinence is normal, this is what we do about it – come forward, help is available, we can live a good life."

One time when I was feeling totally overwhelmed. I complained to Lama Yeshe that I just had too much to do and I felt I couldn't handle it. He wrote back and, referring to the Chenrezig initiation I had taken in Switzerland, he said that I could do everything, that I was forgetting that I had 1,000 arms and 11 heads. After that I put up a picture of Chenrezig in my office as a reminder of Lama's support and encouragement. Lama Yeshe and the Dharma teachings have been my constant inspiration. ☸



Judy, right, at a gypsy wedding, during her time at the Romany School

Judy Weltzner's interest in social work began in early childhood in Oakland, California where her best friends were Japanese, Chinese, and African American. Through their experiences, she became aware of social injustices. Her career began in Richmond, California, a community with a reputation for poverty and violence. Her clients had problems with drug and alcohol abuse. Many lacked the education or skills to gain employment. Fathers were absent from their family, many in jail. She found the key to establishing a trusting relationship with these clients was the practice of equanimity – accepting the person as they were, but keeping the belief that they could build a better life for themselves and their family. She became familiar with the Romany gypsies' social system, and helped them to start the first Gypsy school in the US. She was principal and head teacher for five years. More than once she confessed to Lama Yeshe that she was not keeping her daily practice. He never admonished her. He said that he was perfectly happy with the practice she was doing, which was trying to integrate Dharma into her daily life. "For me, this has been a blessing. I felt that I needed to respond to the suffering around me now with what small wisdom I might have accumulated. I couldn't wait for enlightenment."

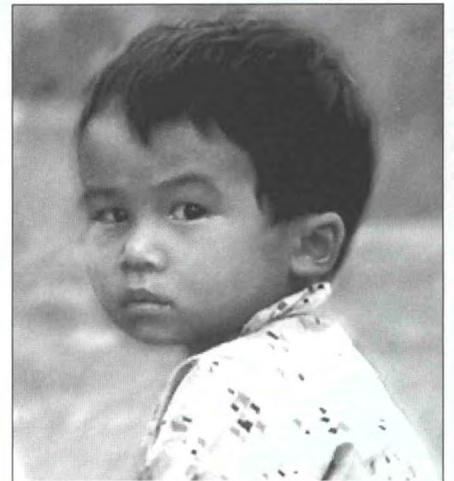
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