

Our residents and clients are constantly challenging society perceptions that getting old means wearing out.

Like most sections of our community, older people represent a broad cross section of humanity; including doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, pilots, writers, social activists, master craftsmen, captains of industry, politicians, parents and grandparents.

It is not only their work, education and community involvement that creates diversity, it's also the experience of life challenges and how people choose to learn from them that amazes those of us who work with older people everyday.

Some of our residents and clients continue to be active in their profession or look after their grandchildren, play sport, volunteer in their community, travel, and mentor the next generation of leaders.

Others need support to adapt to their changing health or the loss of a partner in order to rekindle their spark – although this could easily be said about people of all ages.

What alarms many older people and those of us who have the privilege of working alongside them every day, is the stigma attached to ageing and the potential impact of the misperceptions.

Earlier this month Deakin University released research which found young people and baby boomers thought elderly people were “pleasant and friendly, but ultimately unproductive”.

These perceptions are naïve and far from the reality we see at IRT.

There is vibrancy, wisdom and adaptability in many older people that is often hard to match in younger generations. They really have been there, done that and now they get on with it. The reward of valuing our seniors will be a wiser and more moderate society, better able to adapt to change because of formative life experiences.

Take Jean, a resident councillor at Diment Towers. Jean worked in an office, raised children and step children, gained her pilot's license, volunteered to teach kids with cancer how to be potters and supported her mother until she died last year at the age of 93.

Last week Jean had her hair shaved to raise money for the Leukemia Foundation. She inspired 101-year-old Dot to make her a beanie, and organised the village bus trip for this week's Seniors' Week - beanie and all.

Then there's 92-year-old George, who was distressed when his wife of 70 years had to live separately to him after she developed dementia. George found solace in a story-telling program developed by Kate, one of our dedicated staff, who knew the need to capture the wisdom of our ageing generations.

Now George shares his stories about the perils of camping long ago, about the great love of his life and about being the funny old man "learning to drive" a motorized "scooter", enlightening and entertaining his peers, care staff, volunteers and even the village tea lady.

It's been enough to inspire George to write the musical score to accompany the digital version of his story and start piano lessons. Unproductive?

As an organisation that prides itself in creating communities where older people achieve their optimum quality of life, we welcome the "ageing tsunami" our Federal Government predicts in the Intergenerational Report.

That's because we value the input of older people in our community. We include them, not just in our decision making about the future but also in our capacity to deliver this together.

What about you?

As a society we need to challenge the perceptions of ageing, gain the knowledge of what's really happening and embrace the possibilities of what older people continue to contribute – like Jean and George. We find them inspirational!

- By Nieves Murray, IRT Chief Executive