

Catching Health Podcast
Conversations About Aging: Wayne, 64
March 11, 2019

Diane narration

This is Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood.

What is old? That can be a tricky question. When you're 20, 30 is old. 50 ancient. Wayne is in his 60s and in no way considers himself old. But during a recent job hunt, he discovered that some employers do see him that way.

Wayne

There were numerous occasions where I'd get a phone call from someone and they'd be very excited, you're going to be great for this position and so the next step was either an in-person or a video interview. I could feel the interest drop away in the first few seconds, as soon as they got a look at the gray hair.

Diane narration Wayne finally got a job and he's happy. He told me about the frustration of looking for work as we sat in his living room overlooking a yard filled with bird feeders. A tranquil backdrop as he also talked about growing up in Maine, getting on with his life after the death of his wife, moving away and coming home, and getting older. Notice I said older, not old.

Diane I know you don't consider yourself old, right?

Wayne No.

Diane What do you think old is?

Wayne Old is 80.

Diane I heard recently that old is anyone who's 10 years older than you.

Wayne That works. I'll go there.

Diane How old are you?

Wayne 64.

Diane Did you grow up here in Maine?

Wayne I sure did.

Diane But you left.

Wayne I grew up in South Portland and Windham, lived in Raymond for a while, lived here in Durham, went to the west coast, Portland, Oregon for 8 years and came back.

Diane One of the things I'm interested in knowing about is when you were growing up were there older people around you?

Wayne Yes, my grandmother was around a lot because we lived in South Portland at the time and she lived in Portland and we were in touch with the rest of the family. We had people in Boothbay, well, my granddad was in Boston, so we'd go down to see him. So yes, there were certainly old people around.

Diane Now when we're younger, old people are like way, way over there. Did any of them influence you in any way as you look back?

Wayne Well, where I got my political bona fide is my grandfather, my father's father was a machinist in South Boston and he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. Well, that's an interesting fact. Yup and my dad still has not forgiven Nancy Pelosi for not impeaching George W. Bush. Liberalism is heavily influencing in my family.

Diane You and I are friends on Facebook and you do not hold back on your political views.

Wayne I do not. That's why I do not have public posts.

Diane I didn't know that. I thought the whole world saw your posts.

Wayne Oh, no.

Diane Just your friends?

Wayne No, no. I can't risk that.

Diane Do you think that it's important to be politically active, to at least express your opinions and your voice?

Wayne I think it's important to have opinions and if you have opinions, that, of course, you express them. Yeah, I think people who aren't aware of what's going in the world, who don't think about it, who don't have opinions about it. That's a problem.

Diane Alright, well, we digress. Chuckle. You have been married, you have been in long time relationships, you have children, you have grandchildren. How important is all of that to you?

Wayne Well, I came back home. It's important. I don't have a picture of Oliver handy, but that's why I came back.

Diane As we get older and we get grandchildren, I think something takes hold of us.

Wayne Oh, I used to make fun of people who, you know, in a nice way, who would move across the country to be near the grandkids. I don't make fun of them anymore. I get it.

Diane I think, now that I'm a grandmother I see that unconditional joy and love that they give you. You can do no wrong, at least when they're little. Right. And that feels so good.

Wayne Mm-huh.

Diane Ok, so I have a question about right now. What makes it a good day for you?

Wayne Having interesting, productive things to do, even whether that be work or home. I've got a lot on the docket for today and that will make it a good day.

Diane You've gone through a rough patch in terms of getting work lately.

Wayne You could say that.

Diane What happened? You worked here in Maine and then you moved out to the west coast and you were Vice President of Marketing and Communications. What were you out in Oregon?

Wayne I was what you said, a VP of Communications and Marketing. Seven and a half years and then there was a problem and I got to take the fall for the problem and so I looked for work out there, couldn't find anything and then Oliver came along and I said, why don't I go back to Maine. I was looking for a job in Maine, which there aren't a lot of them, certainly not that

pay very well and then I found a job that was a bad mistake, it didn't work out and so I was kind of on my own, I started teaching online mostly, which is very rewarding. And then along came this opportunity that I get to be useful again, you know, put 35 years of experience to work, that was the worst part of being unemployed, was here I am, I've got all this experience, I've done all these things and I'm not doing them. I'm not sharing them, I'm not putting them to use for anyone, that was very hard.

Diane What was it like when you applied for jobs, did you get called in for interviews? If you did, were you treated a certain way that made it obvious that you were older than what you were looking for?

Wayne Well, yeah. I boil it down this way, nobody wants to hire a 62,3,4-year old into an executive position because they're not going to be around that long, they think, and nobody wants to hire an executive into a lower level position because they figure they're going to be gone, you know, so I think that's a very dangerous age to be unemployed, 60 plus. I found a lot of jobs that I never heard back from and then when I would follow up later, I'd see a picture of a 20-something on the website. And there were numerous occasions where I'd get a phone call from someone and they'd be very excited, you're going to be great for this position and so the next step was either an in-person or a video interview. I could feel the interest drop away in the first few seconds, as soon as they got a look at the gray hair. And I have a friend, a very good friend who's in a similar situation. He's experienced the same thing.

Diane So what's the message that you would like to get across about this issue?

Wayne Don't throw older people away. We've got a lot to offer.

Diane So tell me about the new job. Is it in your field?

Wayne Well, it's interesting. I'm not going to be doing public relations, but I'm going to be helping other people learn how to do it and supervising their work, so I've done that, my job in Oregon was pure leadership, pure management, I didn't touch anything at a practical level but I was managing people. This is a little different in that I'm actually building the company, creating all the systems and the processes and the ways of tracking the requirements of the Department of Labor, so it's ... I've built departments but I've never built a whole company.

Diane The company you're building is an apprentice program?

Wayne Yup, there is an apprentice program through the State of Maine to certify through the Department of Labor and I didn't know this, but there are sets of criteria for almost every occupation there is, somebody has compiled all of these, you need to know these things, you need to have done these things, you need to know this technology and so we'll be charting our apprentices in all those areas and also teaching them additional things.

Diane Name of the company and right now you're building it so you haven't actually started it yet.

Wayne The way I describe it is we're driving the car down the road while we build it or building it while we drive down the road. It's called Word Lab. It's interesting, it's the first for-profit company I've ever worked for in my entire career if you don't count the car wash when I was in high school, but it's also a B Corp, which is an LLC that has a commitment to the community built into its mission statement and obviously, that's workforce development and keeping young people in Maine and bringing people to Maine and that sort of thing so it's not like a pure for-profit company but it is a for-profit company.

Diane Well, congratulations.

Wayne Thank you.

Diane In terms of staying active, it doesn't seem like you have any issues trying to be active?

Wayne Not yet.

Diane No health conditions that prevent you from doing certain things?

Wayne I still shovel snow, I'm not supposed to be doing that. But I do still shovel.

Diane Why aren't you supposed to be shoveling snow?

Wayne Because I have a heart condition.

Diane So you do have a health condition?

Wayne I do.

Diane Do you mind talking about it?

Wayne No. I have some fairly significant blockage.

Diane Can you be active?

Wayne Yup I work out four days a week.

Diane Do you go to a gym or do you have a gym downstairs?

Wayne I do both, depending on where I am.

Diane So, we keep hearing how critical physical activity is.

Wayne Well, let's put it this way. If I had not been very active and in very good shape and been doing it for a long time, I probably would not have had a stent, I probably would have had a heart attack and it was in a very bad spot, so. What had happened was that I had developed collateral circulation around the blockage and that's from exercise. You grow new blood vessels because your heart needs more blood so it's growing around the blockages.

Diane You know some people can be really active and some people have such a hard time being motivated, no matter what they hear about how critical it is for us to be active.

Wayne Yeah, well wake up with a stent. That's pretty motivating.

Diane Do you mind if I ask you a question about Ruth?

Wayne Mmm.

Diane So you were in a relationship with Ruth, whom I knew. A very vivacious, wonderful woman who, unfortunately, had diabetes and eventually passed away and you both were relatively young at that point. In your 50s, maybe?

Wayne I was, it was 2005, so yeah, I was in my early 50s.

Diane That's a hard blow to move on from, I would think and yet, you have a wonderful life now and a wonderful relationship. How did you manage to get from there to here? What sustained you?

Wayne That's a good question for older people, too, because they're going to lose their partners. I don't know, it wasn't easy, but it also wasn't as hard

as I thought it was going to be. I think part of was knowing that we weren't going to grow old together. I knew that early on, so it's like being prepared. In a way. Well, you can't ever be fully prepared, but yeah. And I had some good fortune. I was in a good place, I was having, making a living, I wasn't like unemployed or retired, so I had that in my life to keep me focused and I was lucky to meet someone wonderful or re-meet, I guess, is more accurate. The last three years of Ruth's life were horrible.

Diane What do you mean?

Wayne She was sick much of the time, increasingly agitated. I think she knew what was happening. Basically, she started dying three years before she died, I think.

Diane Is there anything that I have not asked you that you wish I had or that you think is important to talk about?

Wayne As I'm thinking about why you're doing this, I think what I hope people will be able to do is keep that inner life.

Diane You think the inner life is what's really critical?

Wayne Oh yeah.

Diane Is that like being spiritual? How would describe inner life?

Wayne Oh, that's a piece of it and a piece of it is lifelong learning, a piece of it is contemplation. I'm not as good about it as I should be, but I try to practice every day. I have a meditation exercise that I do and I don't do it every day like I should, but I think that's important. I think keeping connection with people is important, even if it's just a few people. You know, I stop at the Freeport Cafe for breakfast sometimes and there's always at least one table of what I call old people and you know that they

meet for breakfast every Wednesday morning or whatever it might be and I think that's critical. Just absolutely critical.

Diane To stay connected?

Wayne Yup.

Diane So, I was going to ask you about any advice that you would want to impart. That's some advice, but what for younger people? Because we were younger people once and even though we knew that we would probably make it this far, when you get here, it's a shock.

Wayne It is that, yeah. I think it would be sort of like I said a little while ago. Do it, do it now, whatever it is.

Diane Just do it, don't put it off?

Wayne Right.

Diane On that note, we shall say goodbye, but before I say goodbye for real, I would like you to tell us the secret to keeping the squirrels off your birdfeeders.

Wayne Baffles.

Diane And you put your baffles in a specific place.

Wayne They have to be at least four feet off the ground because a squirrel can jump four feet and you also have to have your feeders not at least four feet or maybe more than four feet from any trees or building pieces or whatever. The one out on the other side of the house I put a ladder up against the house one day, laid it down, was going to move it later and a

squirrel in less than a few hours figured out that he could get up on a ladder and jump over the baffle to the feeder. They're very clever.

Diane Alright, well thanks for that advice.

Diane narration

You have been listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. To hear more conversations about aging and to read my blog posts on health and wellness visit CatchingHealth.com.

This podcast was made possible by our sponsors Avita of Stroudwater, a memory care facility, and Stroudwater Lodge, an assisted living community, both in Westbrook, Maine. You'll find out more about them at northbridgecos.com

A shout out to Smith Atwood Video Services for editing the podcast. See what else they have to offer at SmithAtwood.com.

And I'd also like to thank Tom Meuser for his support. He's Director of the Center for Excellence in Aging and Health at the University of New England. Tom will be using some of the interviews for research on aging issues in Maine.