

July 20, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Geezers Doing Good

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

This month Bill Gates starts his new full-time career as a humanitarian, leaving behind the software bugs to swat the kind that cause malaria.

We often think of those trying to save the world as bright-eyed young people, but Mr. Gates is part of a booming trend: the “encore career” as a substitute for retirement. Definitions are still in flux, but an encore career typically aims to provide a dose of personal satisfaction by “giving back.”

Some 78 million American baby boomers are now beginning to retire, and one survey this year by a research institute found that half of boomers are interested in starting such new careers with a positive social impact. If we boomers decide to use our retirement to change the world, rather than our golf game, our dodderdom will have consequences for society every bit as profound as our youth did.

One example of this trend is Peter Agre, a medical doctor who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2003 for research on ... on ... well, on something to do with cell membranes that I still don't understand. Dr. Agre could have run his lab indefinitely but was restless to assume a challenge that would more directly affect society.

He thought about politics, but ended up taking on a fancy administrative position at Duke University, thinking he could help shape students and education. Then he became restless again, and this year he took a substantial pay cut to head the Malaria Research Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

“It wasn't a matter of being a Mother Teresa,” Dr. Agre said. “It was a matter of, ‘Boy, that sounds like fun!’ ”

Yet he concedes — a little bashfully — that there is also a thrill at the possibility of helping overcome malaria, one of the great scourges of humanity. These days, Dr. Agre presides over a team of 20 scientists working on everything from designing malaria vaccines to engineering a malaria-resistant mosquito that in theory could outcompete others if released in the wild.

Marc Freedman, author of a book called “Encore: Finding Work that Matters in the Second Half of Life,” notes that adolescence is a relatively modern concept; until the 19th century teenagers normally were treated as adults. In the same way, he says, a new life stage is emerging — the period of 10, 20 or even 30 years after one's main career is completed but before infirmity sets in.

The best things that graying do-gooders bring to philanthropy is their management experience and Rolodexes. Bill and Melinda Gates are most noted for showering billions of dollars on public health, but perhaps just as important has been the hard-nosed business sensibility they invoke, demanding metrics to demonstrate that particular approaches are cost-effective.

Aside from Mr. Gates and Dr. Agre, another general in the war on malaria is Rob Mather, a British management consultant who — thank heaven! — isn't very handy with a TV remote. Mr. Mather was trying to turn off his set in June 2003 when he accidentally flipped to another channel and was riveted by the image of a 5-year-old girl who was struggling to overcome severe burns all over her body.

Mr. Mather suggested to several friends that they swim as a fund-raiser for the girl. Because Mr. Mather is relentless, the swim ended up involving 10,000 people in 73 countries and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Bowled over by the possibilities of mobilizing people for good causes, Mr. Mather set up a swim the next year to raise money against malaria — and this time 250,000 participated. He left the business world and founded a group called [Against Malaria](#), now one of the world's leading organizations battling the disease.

Mr. Mather browbeats businesses into donating services and covering overhead — “we have 17 legal firms working for us, and we've never paid a legal bill” — so every dollar donated to the organization ends up actually used to buy bed nets for families that can't afford them.

He said he had just received e-mail about an African village that had 387 cases of malaria per month before the bed nets were distributed and seven cases per month afterward. Mr. Mather's work has resulted in hundreds of thousands of bed nets being shipped abroad to save lives so far — all of which he finds rather more fulfilling than his previous, more lucrative career.

If more people take on encore careers like that, the boomers who arrived on the scene by igniting a sexual revolution could leave by staging a give-back revolution. Boomers just may be remembered more for what they did in their 60s than for what they did in the Sixties.

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