

National Care Forum and CommonAge – April 2018

Katie Sloan – Closing Remarks



Thank you for the opportunity to be with the National Care Forum and Common Age at this important convening. It is an honor and a privilege.

Being the closing speaker after 3 days of hearing from many of you – the true experts - is a bit daunting.

What has struck me – and continues to strike me over the years as I have advocated for the best possible life for older adults – is that those who work in this field have big hearts. Coming together like this feels like your big hearts are beating as one.

You are among the most dedicated, visionary and influential leaders in ageing services. You have come from many parts of the world, some of you having flown hundreds – maybe thousands - of miles to participate.

Gatherings such as this are a gift. We have the unique opportunity to meet other leaders in aged care and services – to share insights and experiences, to take ideas back home, to make lasting friendships and to recognize that the challenges we face are similar.

It is particularly meaningful for me to be here in England. My own ancestors left England for America in the 1640's. They – like many of your ancestors – sought a place where they could build a new life, a special place where they could be free to practice their religion, where they could enjoy sunrises and sunsets, raise their children and grow old with dignity. In our case, that special place was called New Jersey. It could have just as easily been New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Jamaica, India or Malaysia.

Each generation never forgot where they came from. Both my grandfather and father made deep friendships here, returning to England multiple times. The magnetic pull of this land and its people remained for each of them, - overpowering.

I had a chance to travel with my grandfather on his last trip to London, Oxford and other places he had grown to love, places he had gone with my grandmother. For him, it was a trip down memory lane. For me, it was a unique and special opportunity to see firsthand the importance of independence, place, memories, and friendships.

You see this every day in the work you do providing quality care for older adults across the globe.

Your work – our work together – doesn't get easier; it just gets harder. New rules, funding challenges, competition, staffing shortages, and the list goes on. And yet, you keep at it – every day, day after day.

You reassure families who are worried about the health and safety of their parents and grandparents.

You provide nutritious meals and regular companionship

You engage volunteers who lovingly devote countless hours to your mission

You grow your leaders

You train and reward staff for their dedication

You build and nurture partnerships

You reimagine how things can be done and challenge conventional wisdom.

You do all this – in the best and in the worst of times and circumstances

And – whether you realize it or not – you do all this as part of a vast community of others who are doing the same thing in their cities, towns and villages around the world.

It is not by chance that the organization I represent – the Global Ageing Network is just that: a network.

Throughout history, social change has been possible only through the contributions and dedication of many people and organizations connected to achieve a common goal. Developments such as widespread access to immunizations in less developed countries, civil rights movements or, in the United States, the emergency response system by dialing 911, have happened through the leadership of citizens and groups of all kinds that have linked actions through constellations of relations – Networks, if you will, in all shapes and sizes.

Movements that earn legitimacy have spread ownership around. It's the IKEA effect – people value what they have helped build.

Networks are a collection of people or organizations – and the relationships between and among them.

As networks develop, building relationships AMONG organizations is the most direct path to achieving greater scale of impact.

Networks are all about relationships – who you talk to or work with ... and who THEY talk to or work with....Picture a stone dropped into a pool of water and watch the concentric circles flow outward. This is how networks are built.

A network needs an infrastructure to foster engagement, and to coordinate resources, knowledge and action. To learn from our peers. That is the role that I believe the Global Ageing Network serves.

And to flourish, networks need new people to become engaged, bringing in fresh energy and ideas.

The question then becomes – how do you establish unity amid the cacophony of voices? How do you maintain standards of excellence amid the democratization of control? How do you get loosely affiliated people to commit to a long term vision?

The answer, I believe, is PURPOSE – common PURPOSE.

We are all part of this world that is rapidly aging. At unprecedented rates and with unpredictable results... and we are all largely unprepared.

It is said that necessity is the mother of invention and the father of innovation – and we need large measures of both.

What I have heard over the last few days is as much about the challenges as it is about opportunities. You are not dismayed by the magnitude of the challenges we all face or hampered by a sense of burden or impossibility.

You see a world of possibilities.

Possibilities that lead us to stir up a revolution of innovation in models of care, services and supports. Possibilities enabled by the exemplars, collaborators, and the networks.

The global aging sector is vibrant, diverse and highly motivated. Across the globe, it covers a vast spectrum – from investors and developers in a building frenzy in China, to care home directors in Africa dancing together to a marimba band to celebrate their fellowship, to homes in the UK committed to quality and engagement through My Home Life, to faith-based organizations operating with small margins and big hearts.

Japanese robots aimed at providing companionship are finding homes in New Zealand. Eden-inspired practices are prevalent in South Africa and the Netherlands. Telehealth technologies are reaching people in the most rural and remote areas of Australia. Success with community nursing supporting older people in their homes in Amsterdam have been replicated in Minnesota in the US.

Palliative care practice models developed in Europe have been adopted in Uganda. A senior center in rural Cameroon was inspired by – and paid for – by donations from US providers. Caregiving support networks are growing in Nepal and India.

A community center designed and managed by elders in Japan has been replicated in the Philippines and Nepal.

All of this happens because we have a common purpose and a unique responsibility to create a better world in which to grow old. And, I would argue – we have only begun to scratch the surface in learning together as a global community. We haven't yet imagined the full range of possibilities – the policies, systems and models – that will address the seismic demographic shift and the tremendous opportunity it brings with it. But – based on everything I have seen from my vantage point as director of the Global Ageing Network – I guarantee that we will.

We have the opportunity to learn from each other's' successes and mistakes.

As countries like Thailand consider establishing a long term care system, they are looking at what has worked in other countries.

As the U.S. considers how to pay for long term care, it is learning from Japan, Germany and others.

As so many countries try to solve the challenge of recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce, what can we learn from Israel?

As we consider how to support families, we can learn from Beijing's policy of providing families with a monthly payment to help care for their elders at home.

What can we take away from Nepal's family caregiving outreach and training efforts?

How have design features adopted in northern Europe to facilitate mobility and independence improved quality of life?

And what can be scaled, adapted of rural communities, or applied in less-resourced countries?

Don't get me wrong – even with all that is happening, we have immense unmet needs.

Deep poverty, grandmother's raising their grandchildren because the generation in between has died prematurely, a dearth of qualified workers, deficiencies in quality, and basic human rights that are not respected – the right to lives of dignity, safety and security.

Yes, we have unmet needs and yes, we have each other – and own common PURPOSE and commitment to address these unmet needs, to challenge entrenched ageism, to reverse the poverty, improve quality and advocate for the respect that older people deserve.

And – most importantly, we have the years of experience of those who have lived a long life. We absolutely must listen to these voices - of older people - as we shape the world in which they – and we – want to grow old.

As we near the near of the conference, I am acutely aware that taxis, trains and planes are fueling up to take you home.

Conference calls, emails, tweets, posts, and letters are piling up as you sit here.

Your muscles are aching from sitting for three days.

So, please do me a favor. Stand up! Shake hands, fist bump or elbow pump the people sitting near you. These are your colleagues from around the globe.

In addition to all we have learned from the speakers, panels and break-out sessions, what will drive our careers and contribute to our accomplishments is the men and women we meet and friends we make along the way. We all need colleagues we can trust – where we discover our shared experiences and we need opportunities like this to reconnect with those dear friends and often too distant colleagues again and again.

Friendships forged today .. forged for ten thousands tomorrows.... Forged for our darkest and most sunlit moments....For, if we have a network of friends and colleagues that spans the globe, we can change the world – we can make the world a better place to grow old and we can help each other make those very special places we call home just a little bit better.

We should all try to live the African proverb, which says – if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

Thank you for all you do and for being part of this vast and wonderful global ageing network