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magazine



WOMEN & AGING

Will you look this good at 74?

BY DENEEN BROWN P.18

Tom Sietsema tastes the second Mandu P.31 Gene Weingarten Think you're funnier? P.36



Features

COVER STORY

12 Better with age ▲

Four successful women, ages 33 to 65, reveal their thoughts on aging.
Interviews by Janet Bennett Kelly

18 Strongwoman

Ernestine Shepherd and her sister Mildred went from couch potatoes in their 50s to bodybuilders. But would their ultimate dream come true? *By DeNeen Brown*

24 A wrinkle in time

Twenty years after writing "The Beauty Myth," the author addresses The Aging Myth. *By Naomi Wolf*

Feedback: E-mail comments to wpletters@washpost.com, or share them online at washingtonpost.com.

On the cover: Photograph of bodybuilder Ernestine Shepherd by Marvin Joseph

2 First Person Singular

When he was 24, the Internet was born for him.

3 Whatever Happened To

A comedian's journey of love is no joke.

6 Date Lab

He's an accountant and a DJ. She's ... not impressed.

Going Out Guide

29-30 Music & Theater

The garage-rock treatment from the Dirtbombs, "Bootycandy" and more.

31 Tom Sietsema's Dining

A second Mandu brings comforting Korean to Mount Vernon Triangle.

33 Second Glance

34 Dilbert

35 Crossword

36 Gene Weingarten's Below the Beltway

So, you think you are funnier than our columnist?

Washingtonpost.com

Apply for Date Lab

Single? Fill out our questionnaire, and let us find you a match.

Discussions

TUESDAY: Gene Weingarten on humor @ noon.

WEDNESDAY: Tom Sietsema on dining @ 11 a.m.

THURSDAY: Trend Report's Holly E. Thomas and the Going Out Gurus @ 1 p.m.

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PHOTOGRAPH OF MRS. XI BY JUSTIN FOSTER/SHOOTER



Better with *age*

THEY SAY GETTING OLDER IS A ... BEAR. But many women I know are greatly enjoying life after 40 — or 50 or 60. Our faces may lack the soft contours of youth, but we don't examine them quite as critically, either. We care less what others think because, finally, we know who we are. Energy and drive? Rumors of their demise are greatly exaggerated. ¶ Let's be clear: Life, for most, does not get easier. We are often challenged as never before. Yet we're also not indulging silly ideas about what is, and is not, permissible at our age, whether it's a skirt length or a major career risk. We're more apt to say: "Why not?" ¶ Still, nobody gets off the hook as they age in America, especially women. Weight gain and wrinkles are less acceptable for us than for men. With the modern arsenal of anti-aging potions, there's pressure to force the clock back. Negative stereotypes still abound. (Ever hear of an astrophysicist *grandfather*?) And being both older *and* a woman in the workplace can feel like a double whammy. ¶ We at the Magazine think the topic of women and aging provides rich fodder for a special issue. And so, here it is. On Page 24, feminist author Naomi Wolf reflects on exactly how far women have come since she published her book "The Beauty Myth" 20 years ago. On Page 18, we meet Ernestine Shepherd, a 74-year-old champion bodybuilder who is also a model for inner strength. **And over the next four pages, you'll hear the thoughts of four highly successful women, ages 33 to 65, on how they view aging.** ¶ These stories offer a complex portrait of what it's like to be a woman growing older. And it's hardly all bad. —*Sydney Trent, Senior Editor*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DUSTIN FENSTERMACHER

Ada Polla, 33, the president and CEO of a skin-care company, says she would never go back to her 20s.



Ada Polla, 33

President and CEO of skin-care company Alchimie Forever



INTERVIEWS BY
JANET BENNETT KELLY

WHEN I GET dressed in the morning, I think what my godmother, Dominique, would say about what I'm wearing. At 63, her style is simple and elegant; she looks like Jackie O when [Onassis] was older. We both are Swiss, and in Switzerland, women don't go out wearing yoga or gym clothing. My idea of a casual outfit is jeans, heels, a fitted T-shirt and pearls. I only wear real jewelry, and I'm partial to pearls because they're classic and understated. As I've gotten older, I keep my skirts knee-length, but in general I prefer well-cut dresses in interesting fabrics that don't wrinkle.

My approach to makeup is minimal, but I never leave the house without mascara. I spend more time on my skin care than makeup. My mother, whose beauty routine I emulate, says that the older you get, the more you have to work at it; and when you're feeling grumpy and want to put on sweatpants, that's the time to expend more effort on your outfit and makeup. You'll probably get a compliment or two when you do, and it will help lift your mood. Groomed eyebrows are an absolute key. They are to a face what the perfect pair of shoes is to an outfit.

I would never go back to my 20s. I'm much more comfortable with myself, and people take me more seriously now. I still like being carded, though. It's a compliment [but] ... it's inevitable that in a few years I won't be asked to verify my age. I just had cocktails with a friend who's planning her 40th birthday. I thought, *Omigod, 40*. It's a big number in my mind, but then I think people live until 75 or 80, and that's so far from where I am now.

As I look ahead, I think the key to aging well is finding coherence between how you look and how you feel. My goal is to make peace with the changes in my appearance. I'm not opposed to face-lifts, but a 66-year-old woman who is so nipped and tucked she looks like she's in her 30s is a disconnect.

“The key to aging well is finding coherence between how you look and how you feel.”

Mei Xu, 43

President of Chesapeake Bay Candle and CEO of Blissliving Home



“Women should dress according to their body type and proportions, not their age.”

I WAS BORN in 1967 at the start of the Cultural Revolution, when men and women dressed in Mao-style coats. Since my school had access to foreign magazines and books, I had some exposure to fashion in the West, which helped me develop my own sense of style. I had no real-life models. Today, I'm partial to menswear fabrics and am a believer in having a really good tailor. I tend to wear fitted, solid-color dresses and pencil skirts year-round, paired with white linen or cotton shirts.

The downside of aging is my body doesn't rebound as easily. I travel a lot internationally, which disrupts sleep patterns, and it shows on my face. On the other hand, one of the benefits of getting older is self-acceptance. I'm petite, but I no longer angst about growing another three inches. In fact, now I see my size as an advantage.

I sometimes stretch and lift my face to see what I would look like with plastic surgery, but I'm not ready for that. We have a saying in Chinese: There are no ugly women, only lazy ones. Taking care of yourself is very important. I splurge on facials and on great perfumes.

Magazines pigeonhole styles for women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, but women should dress according to their body type and proportions, not their age. I traveled to Shanghai a couple of weeks ago, and my luggage got lost. I had nothing to wear for a business meeting the following day, so I went to the mall. I'm in the fashion business and wanted something chic. The 20-something shopkeepers showed me a flirty, short floral dress. They romanced me into trying it in spite of my objections. To my surprise, it was very becoming on me. Then, I made a lot of excuses about why I couldn't wear it — and didn't buy it.

But [later] as I thought about my reasons, I realized that I was equating short with young, and now that I was over 40, I was starting to have rules about what I could and could not wear. And it bothered me that I was using my age as a reason not to experiment and try something fun.

Paula Kerger, 53

President and CEO of PBS



“Testing the boundaries of what you’re capable of is what aging is about.”

THE BEST PART about growing older is feeling more confident. About five years ago, I began participating in triathalons. I was working very hard, not exercising and feeling ill frequently when my husband encouraged me to go to a race with him. Seeing women in their 70s (and all ages) competing made me wonder whether I could do it, too. I found a trainer who helped me and whom I continue to work with.

When you physically feel strong, it translates to other areas in your life; and when you’re constantly challenging yourself to do something terrifying — in my case, jumping into the Potomac as part of the D.C. triathlon — it’s empowering.

Participating in these races and preparing for them have had the most influence on my style. I went through a boxy-suit phase (a Washington uniform), but now I tend to wear more tailored clothing, because I’m more muscular and my shape has changed. My absolute essential is a little black dress and black turtlenecks, which I wear through late spring.

Rest is my beauty secret. If I don’t get eight hours, I get black circles under my eyes. I use lots of moisturizer throughout the year and drink copious amounts of water, which makes a difference in the way my skin looks.

At 53, I don’t feel old, but I accept that I’m not who I was in my mid-30s, even though when I look in the mirror sometimes I’m surprised I don’t see that 35-year-old. I have lots of things to accomplish and challenges to take on. At work, it’s my job to propel PBS into the future amid a rapidly changing media landscape. My personal goal is to surpass my athletic performance of last year.

My ideas about getting older are different than those of my parents. I consciously try to care for myself and look at opportunities in front of me. So many people believe that when they get to a certain point in their lives, it’s too late to do something new. I believe that testing the boundaries of what you’re capable of is what aging is about.

Barbara Lang, 65

President and CEO of the D.C. Chamber of Commerce



“I don’t want people to think ... because my hair is gray that I have slowed down.”

NO ONE PERSON has influenced my sense of style. I get ideas from lots of sources — how one person wears a piece of jewelry and how another belts a dress. After years of wearing monochromatic suits while working at IBM and Fannie Mae, I now incorporate color into my wardrobe. I may wear a black suit, but it will never be all black. Because I’ve gotten hipper as I’ve grown older, I stay away from cropped jackets and opt for longer ones.

I don’t buy anything trendy; I invest in good clothes that last me a long time. My biggest splurge is fine jewelry, and although I have an extensive collection, I gravitate toward a couple of pieces, such as my big diamond hoops that go with everything. You know when you leave home in the morning whether you look good. If you have a question, then you need to change. All day, you’ll be self-conscious about it. *Is my dress too short? Am I showing too much cleavage?* I always leave the house thinking that I may be on camera.

I’m blessed with very good skin. I wear makeup (mostly Bobbi Brown products), but less than I used to, and I think I look far better today than 30 years ago, even though I notice the subtle changes of aging. I went all gray early — in my mid-40s — but it came in evenly, and I went with it.

The best thing about growing older is that you really are wiser; the hard part is that you’re faced with your own mortality.

Women in general are discriminated against in lots of ways. Take power couple Bill and Hillary Clinton. People regard Bill as a senior statesman. What you hear about Hillary is that she looks tired and has bags under her eyes. Bill has always had bags, but no one mentions it. Those are the subtle messages that I don’t see changing. Women have gained greater acceptance in the executive ranks, but for older women, it’s still a challenge. We have to fight it. I don’t want people to think because I’m older that I can’t run as fast, or because my hair is gray that I have slowed down. WP