

Viva the Vital
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Lessons from a Generation Silent, But Good

By Matt Thornhill

In recent years it has become fashionable to heap warranted praise on the G.I. Generation -- or in Tom Brokaw's view, the "Greatest" Generation -- comprised of those born between 1905 and the late 1920s who were called to fight in World War II. Interest in Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, also has exploded as marketers and organizations try to better understand this vast and affluent consumer group as they reach midlife and beyond.

Between the two lies the Silent Generation, born 1928 to 1945. Named initially by a *Time* magazine story in 1951, the Silent Generation was shaped by the hardship of the Great Depression, the shared sacrifice of total war during World War II and the struggle against international communism. Most were too young to fight in the front lines of WWII, but they recycled scrap and collected gas rations on the home front — and many of them served in Korea. The Silents absorbed the wartime virtues of patriotism, self sacrifice and a communitarian spirit.

However, this "silent" group gave us revolutionary leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Gloria Steinem, Abbie Hoffman and the Beatles.

Today, these "active seniors," between the ages of 65 and 82, are making a difference in their communities by volunteering at record rates and setting an example one hopes the Boomers will follow. According to statistics from the National Corporation for Public Service, the volunteer rates for older adults, those over 65, are at the highest level ever. Some 9.1 million, or 24% of adults over 65, volunteer in some capacity every year. In 1989, when the Greatest Generation was the nation's 65+ segment, the volunteer rate was only 17%. (Let's allow them a pass, given their contributions earlier in life.)

Maybe it's time to give members of the Silent Generation credit for all the good they're doing by giving them a new name, the Good Generation.

Besides volunteering in education and sports, culture and the arts, the Silents also have been active in social and community services as well as civic, political, professional and international endeavors. They have been a generation well-rounded in where they give back, according to data collected by the National Corporation for Public Service.

To date, Boomers have followed a more focused path. On the one hand, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Boomers are volunteering at an even higher rate than Silents: Almost 24 million, or 30% volunteered in 2009. On the other hand, Boomers have been more likely to take part in education and sports-related capacities, than in civic and social organizations. Not exclusively, but at higher rates than that of the Silent Generation.

Look, we can't complain. It's a positive thing when the Boomer "Me" generation volunteers, especially at record rates, even if the motive is their own progeny, or "Mini Me."

Yet the Silent Generation, interestingly, found ways to give back that also benefitted others, even when they still had a full nest at home.

As the children of Boomers leave the nest (these days, not we don't say "when" in fear that it might "if"), we anticipate they will make their volunteerism focus more civic minded, benefitting someone outside their own DNA pool. To wit, it's already happening.

Organizations like Civic Ventures (civicventure.org) are already tapping into the vast, rich experience found among Boomers (and the Silents) to give back, but in broader ways. Civic Ventures has partnered with foundations for a "Purpose Prize" of \$100,000 awarded to several worthwhile initiatives each year to encourage even more volunteering. For the last few years, every winner has been a program developed by older adults, Silent and Boomer generation both, that make a difference locally, regionally, nationally or internationally.

In our region, we're seeing examples of Boomers stretching their volunteering bone honed all those years helping out in schools or on the sports fields. As Laura Lafayette pointed out in a Commentary this past Sunday, more than 600 volunteers across all generations are planning to help out during Affordable Housing Awareness Week, April 24-28. Kudos to all involved.

Organizations that depend on volunteers should be blessed with an almost limitless supply as the tsunami of Boomers with time to give washes across this land. Groups that capture the interest and commitment of older Boomers will thrive and prosper, accomplishing the tasks set before them.

We are fairly certain Boomers will rush to give back via volunteering, even if they didn't already have a strong track record: it is a scientific fact that those who volunteer after the age of 65 live longer and healthier lives.

Just one more thing Boomers will learn from the Silent, but Good, Generation.