**Article on Ageism written by Sue McDermott**

As the Ageing Well Manager I am of course interested in Ageing, and in particular why we tend to discriminate on the grounds of old age, when we are all getting older from the day we are born.  As I wanted to understand more, I have spent the last nine months studying adulthood, ageing and ageism with the open university.

One of the theories about growing ageism is that it is due to death (which many of us fear) becoming more associated with getting older and ageing.  In the past, life was more dangerous and so death was spread out across the generations. The rate of infant mortality a century ago was much higher, so much so that an old saying was that you didn’t become a mother when you had your first child, but when you lost your first.  Smog, air pollution, unhealthy and unsafe work conditions, road traffic accidents and the two world wars all meant that death was depleting a greater number of children, and younger and middle aged adults.  However, it was the birth of our national health service, seventy years ago, that really turned the tide and meant for the first time that more people on lower incomes were surviving childhood and living longer lives with serious health conditions.

It is a mystery to me that we do not celebrate the achievement and accomplishment of longer life years, and for most the quality of life in those extended years.  Instead, almost on a daily basis the government and media plant the fear of an oncoming ‘tsunami of older people’, whose social care needs we will all have to pay for, and along the way develop cultural caricatures of older people as ‘needy, decrepit, and a burden to others’.  But in a civilised, democratic society, shouldn’t we be caring for each other and particularly those who need more support? Isn’t this how we would all want to be treated?  Why do we value independence over inter-dependence?

Interestingly, the number of older people boosting the economy through caring (for grandchildren, elderly parents and relatives, friends and neighbours) is often omitted from discussions or news, and so too is the magnitude and variety of the voluntary and informal help they provide to small groups, organisations and individuals.  We ought to be rejoicing about the tsunami of older people and their untapped skills, knowledge and experiences that can and do make a real difference to our communities in so many ways.  In these uncertain times the ‘grey pound’ remains powerful - our retail and hospitality economy is supported by our older citizens, and research shows that they are more loyal as customers, more reliable as employees, and more likely to set up their own businesses as ‘older-preneurs’.

So why does getting older have such a bad press? Partly because we have been encouraged to believe youthfulness means opportunity, power, freedom, success and desirability.  Certainly films, programmes and magazines feature so few older people, we have literally become invisible in stories on stage, radio and screen, yet writers and artists continue to be prolific throughout their lives.  Also, anti-ageing is big business, as the growth in ‘age defying’ skin products, hair treatments for both men and women, and the increase in cosmetic surgical procedures all show.  Botox can now remove our frown lines, laughter lines and crows’ feet – what happened to facial lines giving our faces character?

We all want to remain looking young –  but I believe it is also because we think if we look older, we are worried we will be treated as an ‘older person’ and that means either without respect, care or as if we’re invisible.  But until we live, work, relax and socialise inter-generationally, the stereotypes we have will persist. Ageism isn’t just about discriminating against older people, it is all of us being restricted by societal expectations about what we should be doing at different ages and stages of our lives.