

Susanna Barton,
Center for Well Being, St John's Cathedral

CONTINUED

CZ: You speak from caregiving experience. Can you tell us what types of caregiving roles you've held? How did those experiences affect and alter your own thinking about growing older? What led you to conclude that focusing on these issues should now be your life's work?

SB: My caregiving experience is best described as extreme care management. With the couple I mentioned earlier, I hired a geriatric care manager, daily money manager, and attorney to help me structure their daily care needs since I lived four hours away and had a full-time job and a family to raise (hello sandwich generation!) and felt completely inept.

Also, I can't forget to mention hospice: Hospice is a huge lifesaver from a caregiving perspective. Still, my care management for this couple was one of the most time-consuming, nerve-wracking challenges I have ever taken on, even from afar. I do not know how most people (and there are many!) do it. Whether you're on the scene rendering physical assistance or fielding calls from insurance and credit card companies, negotiating caregiver relationships, strategizing with professionals, taking a life's worth of stuff to Goodwill, filling out forms and faxing credentials, this work is life or death – and it's traumatic. I don't want to do that to my kids.

From an early age, I watched my father, the oldest in his brood, become “the person” for his parents, grandmother, older family members, and his in-laws. I understood what that responsibility looks like and how overwhelming it can be. My mother's passing happened so early and quickly that there was no caregiving whatsoever. My father's caregiving needs also were short-lived. He died from pneumonia in the hospital after a 10-day stint on a ventilator. In the years prior, I had begun having frustrating conversations with him about how he intended to live out his final years. He was reluctant to discuss any financial and senior living strategies, and he just got lucky at the end of the day. Dad's end-of-life experience, however, certainly helped inform my brother and me on the right ways to handle health care wishes, medical directives, estates, and all the aftermath.

Currently, I assist my husband and his siblings as needed while they care for their 96-year-old father, who lives independently nearby. All these experiences have emboldened me to get a plan together for myself – and stir healthy conversations about aging with others – so we can normalize the process of aging and design successful strategies for our Golden Years without foisting unnecessary geri-drama on our children and grandchildren. We can leave a better legacy than that!

CZ: Tell us about your website, My Grand Plans, and your book and workbook. What is your goal with these resources and how can agebuzz readers access them?

After my encounters with elder planning “don’ts,” and out of total desperation and PTSD, I started stirring up conversation through an online community called **Grand Plans**. We are also on **Instagram** and **Facebook**. I discovered many intelligent people out there have gone through excruciating senior care scenarios, and they are quite willing to talk about it – some with great enthusiasm, authority, and understanding. And if you want to see the absolute darkest side of caregiving on social media, join one of the caregivers’ group pages where people describe everyday horror stories with sad regularity. I guarantee all these people feel the same sense of resolution to do it better, smarter, and more lovingly for their children. Once you’ve been through the proverbial ringer and know how negatively it can affect loved ones, you are determined to change the course for yourself and others. Grand Plans – in the newsletter and on social media, the blog, and the podcast – is a means of facilitating conversation, sharing resources, and circulating information that can be helpful as we design better senior futures for ourselves and others.

CZ: Tell us about your “20 Steps” concept.

SB: Through conversations with geri-experienced friends on Grand Plans’ social media pages and podcasts, and via work discussions I began having as part of Mayor Donna Deegan’s subcommittee on local eldercare issues, some common threads of that perfect Grand Plan began to emerge – adding to and underscoring what a few other brave writers and realists have been putting out there into the world recently. While everyone has their unique experience navigating the Golden Years with their aging loved ones, the fundamentals of a Grand Plan are highly standard. This is excellent news because it means the steps toward gold-star senior living are well-paved.

So, after listening to others and learning from my own experiences, I discovered there are about 20 steps we can all take now – earlier than most of us think is appropriate – to reduce geri-drama during our Golden Years significantly. These inputs are based on shared stories and reflections – from people I know and books I have read. Together, these 20 moves form a Grand Plan that guarantees reduced stress for the loved ones who will one day be our caregivers, organizers, or life managers. Take even one step of this Grand Plan, and the future looks brighter. Take at least 10 steps, and your golden years may be truly golden. According to multiple conversations, interviews, and research, I believe the fundamental action items for designing a workable Grand Plan are to take nine concrete steps (including contacting professionals, documenting your wishes, and being realistic about your future) and supplement them with 11 soft steps (like embracing your age, trusting those who love you and creating a wonderful legacy), which I break down in greater detail in my book, ***Grand Plans: How to Mitigate Geri-Drama in 20 Easy Steps***. I plan to discuss these 20 Steps in detail in the posts I contribute to agebuzz.

It bears repeating: If you can accomplish, discuss, or consider at least a few – even ONE – of the 20 objectives on your approach to the sunset stroll, you will shine and be shown great appreciation and affection by your people. Only good comes from honest conversation, realistic planning, trust, compassion, and empathy for others – this is the truth! The accompanying workbook I created, the ***Grand Planner***, is a place to write it all down and hold yourself to it. I highly recommend getting both!

CZ: Is there anything else you want to make sure agebuzz readers know about you, your mission, and the resources you’ve created?

SB: You should know you are not alone on this mission to better plan for the future. According to a February 2020 report from the U.S. Census Bureau, all Baby Boomers will be over 65 by 2030 – marking a demographic turning point for the United States. In 2016, there were 49.2 million people 65 years or older (15 percent of the population), and by 2030, that number is expected to be 73.1 million, or 21 percent of the population. Jump to 2060, and the population estimate for people 65 years or older climbs to a staggering 94.7 million people. That’s nearly a quarter of the U.S. population!

Mitigating geri-drama is the single most important event of our lives. It’s all been forecasted and calculated. We cannot “fix” it, sidestep it, or pretend it’s not happening. But we can do something to prepare for it: we can talk about it. We can anticipate it. We can embrace thoughts like “What can I do now to ensure this doesn’t happen to me and the people I love? How can I learn from the challenges my friends and I face? How can I leave a better legacy for my family?” We can answer these questions with planning, acceptance, and good old-fashioned conversation. I look forward to having many of those talks with you via **agebuzz** and on **MyGrandPlans.com**.