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Bloomingdale Aging in Place residents and Columbia Public Health students. Photo: Nicole Levy

## STUDENT VOICES //

AGING, COMMUNITY HEALTH, ENVIRONMENTAL  
HEALTH **Dec. 07 2018**

# A Discussion for the Ages

## A COLUMBIA PUBLIC HEALTH STUDENT GROUP HOSTS AN EVENING OF INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION AROUND CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

**C**hairs were set in circles, pillows were propped up, and coasters were arranged in four living rooms throughout Bloomingdale, a neighborhood on New York's Upper West Side. Soon, these living rooms would become the sites for an evening of introductions, snacks, explanations, laughter, histories,

apologies, knowledge, and calls to action. But for a brief moment after the set-up was complete and before the first knock on the door, no one knew for sure what to expect.

Public health students know that [society is rapidly aging](#), and that social isolation, which affects people of all ages but is more prevalent in older adults, can have [negative effects on health](#). Combined, this means that addressing social isolation in older adults is a major public health prerogative. When the Columbia Mailman School's Perspectives on Aging student group (PoA) set out to plan an event to enable intergenerational communication, however, we were more motivated by the fact that having younger and older people talk to each other just seemed like a good idea. From this vague notion, we developed a concept for an Intergenerational Climate Change Discussion Group.



MS Student Evan Eschliman. Photo: Beryl Goldberg

In the past, PoA has partnered with Bloomingdale Aging in Place (BAiP), a neighborhood network of older adults between West 96th and 110th streets that tasks its 1,300 members with building community to ensure a high quality of life for themselves as they age at home. Intergenerational discussion groups between BAiP members and Mailman students had been arranged before, but in a restaurant setting. These were successful, but ultimately conversations suffered from the noise level one endures when dining out. This time a bold new plan was proposed: situate the discussions in the homes of BAiP members, and choose a topic of great mutual interest that would benefit from the perspectives of two age groups.

In order to stimulate a rich dialogue, we chose the topic of climate change, and to give the conversation a shared foundation, participants were asked to read Nathaniel Rich's historical perspective piece "Losing Earth" published in the August 1, 2018,

*New York Times Magazine.*

With over 40 participants recruited, readings completed, and discussion questions circulated, it was time for the first knock. From there, strangers soon became acquainted and immersed in a discussion on political will, activism, sustainability, the role of science in society, individual responsibility, the power of the collective. **Perspectives were more nuanced than simply younger versus older.** People were from different places—Italy to Austin—and brought different personal experiences. **Some never had the chance to discuss climate change with their families, others were deeply involved with environmental activism.**



"In our age-segregated society, there is such little access to opportunities for intergenerational communication." Photo: Caitlin Hawke

The two hours sped by, and soon participants were putting on their coats to leave. Much of it was what one would expect: discussion was candid, participants were eager to participate, and everyone had perspectives to contribute. But what was not anticipated, speaking for

both myself and many who shared their experiences afterward, was the deep warmth and energy with which we came away from the event. As one participant summed up their feelings afterward: "Now I want to call my representative, but also call my grandparents."

**For Mailman students, discussing topics in groups is nothing new, but there was truly something about this experience that elevated the discourse, something both healing and affirming.**

Laptops and preconceptions were set aside in favor of really seeking to communicate. In our age-segregated society, there is such little access to opportunities for intergenerational communication. And even rarer is the opportunity to have a conversation about societal concerns with people of different ages as peers. This event filled that gap, perhaps that *need*.

Each person came away from this event not only feeling good, but also more equipped to continue inciting and seeking intergenerational dialogue. With society facing big challenges, it is so easy to forget how simple it can be to make a difference. Even though a single person might not be able to eliminate social isolation in older adults or reverse climate change, a single person can seek to understand another and build bonds— inside and outside their age group—and that is certainly a start.

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