

"Life is a journey that has a lot of surprises" – Growing Older & Wiser in Brookline

This is the first in our new feature series "Growing Older & Wiser in Brookline." Readers are welcome to propose local seniors who would be interesting subjects for future articles to Miriam Rosalyn Diamond at mdiamond@brooklinema.gov



Rhoada Wald is an author, retired international educator, mother-grandmother-greatgrandmother, and member of the Brookline Senior Center. The eldest of 4 children raised in the Bronx, New York, she learned to overcome challenges early in life.

As a young adult, Rhoada became a teacher, married, and had three children. When her marriage ended, she sought work that offered the flexibility necessary for her to care for young children as a single parent. So she became a supervisor of student teachers. This led to her doctorate in Curriculum and Teaching at Columbia University, followed by a career in higher education.

A key turning point in her life occurred after she went to Mexico for her divorce. Until that point, she hadn't travelled much. She returned home saying "The world is a big place. Let's go on a camping trip." Despite warnings from naysayers who told her an inexperienced camper shouldn't do so, Rhoada rented a tent and embarked on a 1,200-mile trip through New York state. She recalls setting up a tent with her youngsters in the rain near the Canadian border while other campers looked on with interest yet did not offer assistance. As a result of this journey, she learned she didn't have to listen to others, and that she could try things others said she couldn't do.

"I'm proudest of my family and what I achieved... in my worklife" says the grandmother of six and great-grandmother of three (with one on the way). Her children provided the "most rewarding experiences " of her life. (If she could, she says she would have had ten!) Her professional honors include a university-wide award for excellence in teaching at Empire State College, SUNY. She also received a Fulbright Award to work with administrators and faculty in India. "I fell in love with India" she states. She went on to coordinate an international program in Israel and develop academic offerings in Cyprus. She published a memoir, *The Myth of the Yellow Kitchen*, and a poetry book titled *The House Loved Us*. She also was an editor and contributing writer for *New Pathways for Aging*, published by the Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement.

Upon retirement in 1998, Dr. Wald moved to Brookline to be closer to her family. Asked what gives her purpose, she immediately responded "life." She is committed to family and friends. Social justice "at all levels" is another of her core values - from within her apartment building to international matters.

Rhoda identifies her strengths as kindness ("I don't judge people"), generosity, flexibility and resourcefulness. An example of the former is when, upon discovering the Senior Center, she immediately made a point to meet and introduce herself to the Director. She appreciates the Center's many resources and fun experiences, such as musical performances. She also values the opportunity to spend time with people experiencing the same life stage. The Bereavement Group has been supportive as she mourns the loss of her son.

Her other activities include exercising with a trainer online and swimming a few times each week. She recently resumed playing Bridge. Rhoda is an active member of her synagogue and their Lifelong Learning Initiative. She enjoys "reading about people who are exceptional and/or transcend difficulty" and continues to write her own prose and poetry regularly.

Inspired by "people who think about what path they take in life," Dr. Wald looks at President Barack Obama as an example. "He doesn't play by the rules" and is "not quite conventional - he chose his own path."

When asked about her stage of life she responds "I think aging is very hard...You have to make up your own roles - what you do with your life...And you have to face your mortality." A number of her friends are ill or dying. "So many things happen that you have no control over." Her wish is "not wanting to be taken care of by other people" She finds that psychotherapy helps her cope with setbacks and is "an indication of strength... Life is complex and sometimes you need a support system outside of the family."

If her life were a book, she would title the current chapter "The Mystique of Aging," "Coping with Aging" or "Dealing with the Mystique of Dying" Her goal is to stay independent and be "able to do (things) myself for as long as I can." She's looking forward to "Peace - peace in my personal life, peace in the world."

If she went back in time, she would tell her younger self to "think carefully about the choices you make" - for example, choosing romantic partners who are more her "emotional equal."

One of the key lessons she learned is that "individuals are different and that they're different in different ways." Another is to "construct your life as best you can, but you never know when the next turn is going to be. That's where flexibility comes in." She would like her legacy to be generosity, kindness, interpersonal connections She also lists commitment to something outside herself as well as to the people she loves.

Rhoads's perspective can be summed up as "Life is a journey that has a lot of surprises" and "You have to transcend difficulties and move on."