

**Newsweek**

Turning 60

The generation that vowed to stay forever young is coming up on a major milestone. But for the 3.4 million Americans who were born in 1946, retirement is a distant prospect, and life still holds plenty of promise and surprises. They've been hippies and yuppies; and now it's the time of the 'abbies': aging baby boomers.

By Jerry Adler
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Nov. 14, 2005 issue - It was quite a journey, wasn't it? In one year, 1946, 3.4 million Americans were born, a jump from 2.8 million just the year before (at the height of World War II) and 2.4 million a decade earlier (in the midst of the Depression). Just five days into 1947, The Washington Post heralded the start of the baby boom, a "fruit of demobilization," although it assured readers that it wouldn't last. In fact, Americans, like any species with no natural enemies and a new ecological niche to exploit—suburbia—embarked on a wave of fecundity that lasted 19 years and added 78 million people to the world.

Those first boomers were a year old when Howdy Doody first dangled on a TV screen the size of a dinner plate, 17 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, 23 when they converged on Woodstock and 36 for the start of the great bull market of the 1980s.

They and their siblings invented not just the epiphenomena of youth culture—blue jeans and rock music, sexual permissiveness and political alienation—but the very idea of youth as a separate realm of experience and knowledge. They leveled the decades-old walls between the races (9 when the Montgomery bus boycott began) and the genders (they looked for their first jobs in classified ads labeled "Help Wanted—Male" or "Help Wanted—Female"). It is by now a commonplace that they have redefined each stage of life as they passed through it, a rolling full-employment project for sociologists, marketing consultants and, not least, journalists. In honor of their latest milestone, which ushers them into the fraught decade of their 60s, NEWSWEEK is taking a fresh look at the generation that vowed to stay forever young, through their own eyes and those who have made a career of studying them. They face concerns about finances, their health and the state of the world, but their exuberance is undiminished. It's not as if they're getting old.

Some on that leading edge of boomerdom fared better than others, of course. Death has taken its toll on the 1946 cohort; of the 3.4 million born that year, only about 2.8 million (including immigrants) were left to turn 59 in 2005. We know that George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Cher and Donald Trump were all born in that magical year, and made the most of the opportunities that history had bequeathed them. So was Micki Ross, a schoolteacher in Glencoe, Ill., with two grown children, whose unheralded life has left her content and optimistic about the future. But that was also the birth year of Sally Debol, who lives with her husband in a suburb of Detroit and describes herself as among the "working poor"—without a car or a house or a pension to show for her 30 years' employment at a publishing company that went bankrupt. And also Dennis Kroucik, who nursed his wife through breast cancer and now increasingly relies on her to guide him through the gathering fog of Alzheimer's disease. As a boomer, he worries about forgetting his wife, his kids—and how to dance.

To say boomers expect to stay young isn't just a figure of speech, it is a statistically verifiable fact. "Baby boomers literally think they're going to die before they get old," says J. Walker Smith, president of Yankelovich Partners, the polling company, which found in one study that boomers defined "old age" as starting three years after the average American was dead. People 60 years old today have an actuarial life expectancy of 82.3, but boomers don't consider themselves bound by the laws of statistics; they "fully expect that advances in health care and genomics are going to enable them to live past 100," says Smith. Presumably they are counting on those advances to offset the fact that 30 percent of them are obese. "We don't expect to die—we expect to be cured," says Ross, the Illinois teacher. She went to four funerals in one month last year, for her mother, her aunt and her brother-in-law's parents. But those were all from a different generation; when her own sister had breast cancer three years ago, she had a mastectomy and survived. "We get a diagnosis, and we look for somebody out there who can help us," Ross says.

Exactly how they plan to spend the years from 60 to 100 is of consuming interest to the cottage industry devoted to gazing into boomers' navels for them. Extrapolating from history is not very useful. "They've lived a cyclical life," says consultant Matt Thornhill, president of the Boomer Project, contrasting it to the "linear life" of their parents' generation, a straight line from college to office to the golf course. "Just knowing their age doesn't tell you what life stage they're at. They reinvent themselves every three to five years. A boomer could be a brand-new dad, or a grandparent." This "life stage" concept is the latest buzzword in consulting. "If you're marketing to boomers, you should start staying away from age," says Jim Gilmartin, president of Coming of Age, Inc. "Some boomers are new dads at 59." (The marketing industry's apparent fixation on boomer fathers belies the statistics, which show that as of 2002, the 27.5 million American men older than 55 were responsible for about 83,000 births, a fertility rate of 0.3 percent.) As they cycled through their various life stages they passed through hippie and yuppie to a new phase for which the word has yet to be coined: abbies, perhaps, for "aging baby boomers." The generation that credits itself with inventing irony ought to appreciate the oxymoron.

They will never grow old, just "age" in quotation marks. The rhinestone-studded reading glasses that are a hot fashion trend among boomers aren't just incidentally dorky; they're an ironic reference to what an "aging" person might wear. (Eighty-eight percent of Americans older than 55 need vision help.) "I've always tried to look at a walking stick as a fashion accessory, no different than purses or shoes," says Connie Hallquist, who founded the Virginia-based Gold Violin, a catalog and online store for people who need 10x magnification in their compact mirrors. "You should have a different cane for evening, for springtime and for when the grandkids come over." (The last time anyone counted, in 1997, 6.4 million Americans used a cane or walker.)

Eyeglasses and walking sticks can't be disguised or hidden, so they might as well be flaunted. Other industries may take the opposite approach of making incremental, even subliminal, concessions to boomers' physiology in an effort to ease the blow to their psyches. Wes Brown of Iceology, an authority on automobile marketing, was wowed by the "huge" size of the dashboard controls and labels on the new Infiniti M series. (Giant buttons are a hot design trend; a mail-order company called Dynamic Living sells sound-amplifying telephones with buttons larger than quarters.) Brown also predicts that carmakers will soon start making lower SUVs, to ease the climb for boomers who may have left their walking sticks in the Thunderbird. "Is anyone going to admit they're doing this because we're getting older and fatter? Of course not. Manufacturers won't advertise that their SUV is an inch lower because the point is to sit up high. But the connections are clearly there." Chico's, the mass-market clothing retailer popular with customers of a certain life stage, has adopted a 0-to-3 sizing system so that no one has to actually own up to being a size 16. "If you like a little room," the company's Web site suggests genially, casting it as a simple question of preference, "go for a bigger size."

And how will they even know when they're old, since they don't plan to retire? In 1905, William

Osler, "the father of modern medicine," gave a speech at Johns Hopkins about "the uselessness of men above sixty years of age, and the incalculable benefit ... if men stopped work at this age." He was 56 then, and about to take a prestigious chair at Oxford, which he kept until he died at 70. Most baby boomers are willing to believe their own contributions to society are at least as valuable as Osler's, and their careers as interesting. That may be especially true of the ones now in their late 50s, who had their pick of the high-paying, high-status jobs when they entered the work force, compared with the ones who came a few years later. The definitive Merrill Lynch New Retirement Survey found that 81 percent of boomers expect to keep working past 65. "They want the action," says Ken Dychtwald, president of Age Wave. "They don't want to be on the sidelines."

But neither do they necessarily want to keep going to the same office or classroom or shop every day. The Merrill Lynch study found that 56 percent of boomers would like to change careers, and AARP surveys show that just over half have already made at least one major career change. "That's mind-boggling," says Dychtwald, whose latest book is "The Power Years: A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life." "You have corporate CEOs who want to be schoolteachers, and marketing managers who'd really rather run a coffee shop, bookkeepers who want to join the Peace Corps. They'll work fewer hours or only eight months a year, and they won't be as concerned about having the biggest office or the most lucrative job. It will be more important to do something they enjoy." And they're not going to let geography stand in their way. Del Webb, a longtime leader in building what used to be called retirement communities, recently opened a new "Sun City" in the frost belt near Chicago, for boomers who want the trappings of retirement without the inconvenience of quitting their jobs. Nearly two thirds of their boomer customers plan to keep working; floor plans have expanded to accommodate home offices, and the company increasingly has moved its leisure activities and classes to after business hours.

Work doesn't have to be something that brings in a paycheck. There are, says Dychtwald, two models boomers can choose to follow. One is the so-called Third Age model, popularized by the psychiatrist Erik Erikson, involving the cultivation of wisdom and a contribution to society. (With the caveat that "if you are leaving a law firm with a degree from Harvard, you're probably not interested in serving pizza to kids, you'll want to do something that uses your skills.") The other is the one Dychtwald sees prevailing among older adults in America today, which is that you paid your dues and now it's your turn to sit back and collect the dividends. The boomers, on their existential journey, will be free to choose.

Some of them will, anyway. For others, working will not be a question of nurturing their self-image, but of economic necessity. On this point, demographers are unanimous. "I think the golden age of retirement and early retirement is over," says Linda Fisher—a remarkable statement considering that she's the head of member research for AARP, whose *raison d'être* is to lobby for senior citizens. "Right now, people have it all; they can retire in their 50s, get another job if they want, and when they retire [for good] they don't have to do anything. But we don't know what the future holds. We don't think the country will be able to do as much for people in the future." American society's experiment with retirement began in the 1930s, when most people didn't live much past 60 anyway—and when easing old people off the payroll was seen as a solution to unemployment. For boomers today to exit the work force en masse and start demanding pensions would spell economic disaster. Cheryl Russell, a well-known demographer, predicts "a massive downscaling" in boomers' standard of living. She cites a recent study that contained the chilling news that three fifths of Americans between the ages of 21 and 64 have neither an IRA nor a 401(k). "Most of the press acts like everyone owns one," she says. "Many of them haven't faced retirement planning yet, but when they do, it will come as a shock."

In the saga of the boomer generation, pensions loom large. Whole lives have been built around them. Micki Ross moved around a lot in her career as a teacher, from California to Illinois to

Wisconsin, but not long after her husband retired from his job in 1993 she uprooted her family to move back to Illinois, where she could take advantage of the years she had already invested in that state's pension system. Although she loves what she describes as "the greatest job ever," she reluctantly put in for retirement, effective 2008, to qualify for a buyout offer that will increase the base pay on which her pension is calculated. The formula that applies to her is an average of the four highest years' pay, times the number of years worked, times 2.2 percent, to a maximum of 75 percent. The great majority of post-baby-boomers now entering the work force have roughly the same chance of duplicating that deal as they do of seeing Elvis on "Ed Sullivan." With two grown children she calls "financially independent, sort of, until some-thing bad happens," and a husband retired from a white-collar job with a big corporation, Ross describes herself as content, with "the freedom to be young and do what I want to do."

Aundre Clark, a self-employed music teacher in Augusta, Ga., would like to be able to retire soon, too, except that she quit the school system 20 years ago to take care of her dying mother. Her husband, Thomas, is still working in construction at 66, but that's not a field that offers a lot of retirement options. "We talk about this a lot," she says. "Who will do what for us, when we can't take care of each other any longer." Clark always sought to follow the example of her father, who cut firewood for a living and put aside a few dollars each week from his earnings. "I try to do that," she says, "but sometimes is never enough." So she substitutes insurance policies—life, health, disability. She and Thomas are now up to five. Karol Schnabel, of Hudson, Ohio, never saved much or earned a pension during the years she spent raising three children and working off and on in sales. She thought her problems were solved when she got a six-figure divorce settlement in 1999. Following what she now recognizes as terrible advice, she promptly lost half of it in risky high-tech stocks. "Life," she says, "was supposed to be easier."

It was supposed to be easier, too, for Patrick Debol, who is 58, and for his 59-year-old wife, Sally. Growing up in the 1960s he protested the Vietnam War, but his way out of it was to volunteer for the Army so he could be sent to Europe instead. On his return he took a job at a division of General Motors, where his father worked. Autoworkers have famously generous pensions, at least until their companies go into Chapter 11, but Patrick left after a year and never again worked anywhere where he qualified for a pension. His wife's company went bankrupt, and when their house burned down in 1997 their fire insurance just covered the mortgage. Patrick had set some money aside in an IRA, but used it when he needed it for something else. "I guess," he says, "that when you're young you don't think about the future much. You think you have all the time in the world." He blames himself, in part, but he also wishes he'd gotten better advice—to stay in the Army, or to go to college—and he admits to feeling a little bitter at times. "Some baby boomers got a big slice of the pie," he says, "people like David Letterman and George W. Bush. But it never really came to me." This would be more of a problem if he thought he was getting old, but like all boomers, he assumes that time is actually on his side. "I still have some good years left in me to work," he says stalwartly.

There's the boomer credo in a nutshell: there are good years left. A 60-year-old who expects to live to 100 is only halfway through adulthood. They are intent on refuting Pablo Picasso's maxim that "one starts to get young at the age of 60, and then it's too late." For boomers, it's never too late. That's the lesson of one of the 3.4 million, a retired electrician who grew up on Motown records and remembers wanting to change the world and "have some fun while we were doing it." Life may not work out exactly the way we'd hoped, he says. "For some, it will be better. For others, maybe not so good. But for me, right now, it's a whole lot better than what I thought a few years ago. If you want to do something, go for it. Learn something new. You never know what's going to come along and kick you, but for me, I have my wife, I have my kids, and I can still dance."

That's Dennis Kroucik, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2002, at the age of 56.

With Pat Wingert in Washington, Karen Springen, Jamie Reno, Allison Samuels, Joan Raymond

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