

Young stereotypes die hard

By Susan V. Bosak

I don't believe in a generation gap, but I do believe I am being ignored. I am a resource that is as important as oil and as precious as gold, but as neglected as a littered park. The English language cannot satisfactorily name me: because I'm over 18, I'm legally an adult, but society does not accept me as an adult until I am married and/or in the work force. "Adolescent" sounds clinically sterile, and "youth" is parentally patronizing. As close as I can come to naming my 15-to-25 age group is "young people."

Being young means I get lost somewhere between Donald Duck cartoons and the 11 o'clock news – there is virtually no programming for us at a time when we are very open to learning and understanding. When I recently proposed a TV news program that would reflect a young person's viewpoint, I got shuffled from office to office until it was abundantly clear that they had no department for, and no interest in such an idea.

Society demands that I become more concerned, more responsible and committed to intellectual achievements, yet I am not allowed a commensurate increase of participation in decision making. Why can't a national poll, open only to the voting public under age 25, be conducted in decisions affecting my future – in the development of energy resources, for example? Obedience and submission are demanded precisely when my energy and desire for autonomy are greatest. Why wasn't it culturally acceptable for me to start my writing career, get out in the world for a while, and then get a university degree?

How often have I been stereotyped as inexperienced and youthfully idealistic – are these unfair labels based solely on the fact that I am 19? As a veteran high school science fair participant, I discovered that getting a bull to give milk was often easier than getting a university professor to listen to my ideas or give me lab time. When I suggested in a science project that thermoelectricity be used as an additional energy source to offset the energy crisis, the judges at the fair answered with a smile and a nod, implying "You have a lot to learn." I felt angry and frustrated at this response, but I did learn. I designed a thermoelectric web (for producing electricity) that not only worked and won top awards – including a gold medal at the national level – but also proved that thermoelectricity was feasible and economical.

At present, part of my time is spent doing on-camera freelance work for *News At Noon*, a local TV program. I decided to pursue a career in the media because I believe communication is important. I try to bring my enthusiasm and concern to my work – if I'm not interested in what I'm babbling about, why should anyone else be? "Dear," I am lectured, "what an idealistic outlook! You'll face reality soon." Well, it seems to me that dreams and ideals, malady

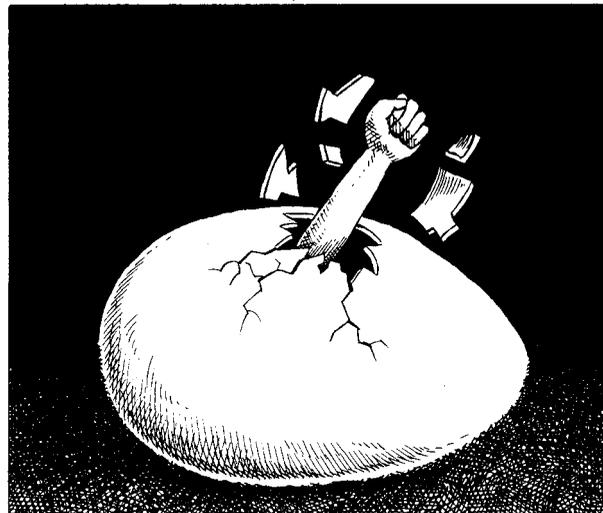
of the young, have gotten us a long way.

These days young people are not recognized, but idolized. Jogging, health foods and cosmetic surgery are all designed to keep society young. But, no one *listens* to the chronologically young. All people want is my body! Young people are imitated, discussed, analyzed and criticized, but rarely consulted. Yet, I still do not believe the lack of recognition given to young people is caused by a generation gap, a term that has been used for years by young people and by adults as an explanation, or an excuse, for passing fads such as the raccoon coats, beer and petting parties of the Roaring '20s, the panty raids and fraternity hazings of the '40s, to the drugs, peace marches, student power movements and hippies of the '60s.

I realize that I am not alone – that feelings of frustration, alienation and worthlessness are shared by many groups in our society. But we could all benefit by solving the problem that exists essentially because you and I do not have a holistic, humanistic outlook on our world. (Pardon me if my idealism is showing!) Our lack of understanding exists, not because older people do not talk with younger people, but because *people* do not communicate with *people*. There seems to be little interest in understanding each other.

I believe I can solve our common problem and that the solution begins with me – the young person – because the future of our world rests in my hands. I care too much to let our globe continue to bounce where it haphazardly falls. There are things we must change now. Why can't we stop looking at each other in such a narrow-minded, stringent fashion? Why don't you acknowledge the importance of young people as *people*? Do not ignore or categorize me, but recognize me as a human being. Do not isolate me on an institutional, educational iceberg, then pull me into the equatorial work world after university and complain, as I melt in the heat, that I do not responsibly deal with government, the economy or human relations. Let me into your world earlier. Invite me to your board meetings. Let me voice my opinions and ask questions which may give me insights into problems I will face in the business world you leave behind. Give me a small place (and a voice to go with it) in government – perhaps a youth advisory council. Allow me a role in the electronic and print media (not a *separate* program or magazine, but a part of your programs and publications) to present and discuss issues of concern to both of us. Give me channels to use my energy for constructive, recognized work and I will not have time to stage protests or riot.

Do not criticize my idealism or inexperience, for inexperience gives me a fresh perspective. I may just take an old screwdriver, used for decades and decades to unscrew the fastenings of society, and innovatively use its handle as a hammer to nail things back into place. And if, because of the encouragement you give me now, I do something to help you or better our world, I will have you to thank. I am your park, your future. It is up to you not to litter me.



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