

Both Sides Now:

Exploring the Unique Advantages of Intergenerational Friendship

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Abstract

Friendship contributes to a flourishing life, yet most research and writing on friendship focuses on friends who are demographically similar to one another, known as homophily in social networks. Homophily in friendship is particularly pronounced within and among age and life stage. Yet, friendship between adults with more than 20 years of age difference confers unique benefits to both the older and younger individuals within them. Through a positive psychology lens, this paper reviews the literature on intergenerational friendship and identifies and explores key advantages of intergenerational friendships through a qualitative study of ten individuals in such friendships. Among many benefits, intergenerational friendships offer the younger half of friendship dyads authentic and durable acceptance, deeply meaningful mentorship, enthusiasm for niche hobbies, personal navigation, and a sense of pride in the relationship. This paper also suggests directions for future research of intergenerational friendship, such as the factors that may predispose adults toward intergenerational friendship and methods to amplify the benefits of intergenerational friendship.

Keywords: intergenerational friendship, cross-generation, social connection, positive relationships, friendship and well-being, ageism, positive aging, positive psychology

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Both Sides Now: Exploring the Unique Advantages of Intergenerational Friendship

Under a setting sun on June 11th, 2023, Joni Mitchell walked on to the renowned stage of The Gorge amphitheater in central Washington state. She sat triumphantly at the center of a semi-circle surrounded by fellow musicians to perform her first ticketed show in 20 years. A crowd of over 27,000 people watched in awe and gratitude as Joni, age 79, in collaboration with her good friend Brandi Carlile, age 42, sang and told stories and played the guitar. I was among the fortunate fans to witness this remarkable event in person, singing (and laughing, and crying) along to many of Joni's genius lyrics under a clear, starry sky. "Viva la old age!" Joni exclaimed, one of her many playful quips of the evening.

In the following days, esteemed publications nationwide extolled the event as historic and legendary for Joni's resilience in the face of the aneurysm that almost took her life in 2015, for her deep and resonant voice, her quick wit, and her storytelling prowess. All true, though most media failed to emphasize one important element of the evening and the way it came to be: the meaningful, loving, and mutually beneficial friendship between Joni Mitchell and Brandi Carlile, two women with more than 35 years age difference. Their intergenerational friendship epitomizes many of the benefits that this paper explores. It is the beautiful act of engaging, as Joni croons, "both sides now" (Mitchell, 1969) (See Appendix A).

Intergenerational friendship, which I define herein as voluntary and mutually beneficial engagement between two adults with at least 20 years of age difference, offers many benefits for both the older and the younger sides of the relationship. Such benefits—e.g., inspiration for lives fully embraced, enthusiasm for and engagement in shared interests, pride in seeing the other grow, reciprocity in skill-building and sharing knowledge, and more—are advantageous for both individuals engaged in the friendship, no matter the age of each nor their age difference.

Understanding, accepting, and appreciating myself is a result of the positive friendships in my life. Whether these friendships span decades or are recent, short-lived connections, the benefits are clear: I explore, grow, contribute, and feel as though I matter. My cross-generational friendships, however, offer another layer of acceptance, comfort, and learning beyond those of my beloved age-similar friendships. These intergenerational friendships feel unique and advantageous in ephemeral ways that initially eluded words, and those missing words planted the seeds of this exploration.

Prior research thoroughly documents the importance of social connection and friendship on well-being, yet research on intergenerational friendship between adults is lacking (Korkiamäki & Elliott O'Dare, 2021; O'Dare et al., 2019). Through interviews with ten adults 32-69 years old, and extensive review of academic writing about social connection, friendship in general, and intergenerational friendship specifically, I explore the advantages of intergenerational friendship with a particular focus on the benefits the younger adults in the friendship receive from this type of relationship. Deciding to focus on the younger side of intergenerational friendship arose from my dismay that much of the intergenerational and “friendship in aging” literature focuses on the benefits of intergenerational friendship for young children or elderly adults. Yet adults of any age can benefit from having older friends, and this paper explores just a few of those benefits, including authentic and durable acceptance, deep and meaningful friendship (which I call “mentorship plus”), nonjudgmental enthusiasm for niche hobbies, personal navigation support, and a sense of individual and dyadic pride in the relationship.

Overview of Positive Psychology

As it turns out, there is a word that distills the ephemeral nature of friendship: *philos*, a Greek word for deep, loving, mutually-beneficial friendship (Konstan, 1996). *Philos* is perhaps one of, if not the single biggest contributor to what Aristotle calls the “the good life” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 142). The field of positive psychology focuses on this concept of the good life, its constituent elements, and the benefits thereof; human connection is the baseline (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Indeed, the field’s *crie de coeur* is “Other People Matter” (Peterson, 2006, p. 249). Other people matter so much, in fact, that if people can change only one thing in their life to improve their well-being, the biggest bang for their buck is to invest in the quality of relationships with other people (Berscheid, 2003).

For centuries humans have explored what constitutes a happy, meaningful, and fulfilling life. Aristotle argued that *hedonia*, or the experience of stability, security, and pleasure, could drive a sense of happiness, *eudaimonia*, or the experience of alignment in character, moral virtue, reason, action, and external resources, drives a sense of meaningful well-being (Melchert, 2002). While the pursuit of pleasure can certainly be important, fun, and engender positive emotions, positive psychology is primarily focused on the mechanisms for seeking, creating, and sustaining *eudaimonia* in addition to the psychological richness of diverse, novel, and varied life experiences (Diener et al., 2017; Nozick, 1990; Oishi & Westgate, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Silvia & Kashdan, 2021; Su et al., 2014). Positive psychology is thus far more than the singular exploration of “happiness” but rather the exploration of aspects of life that promote well-being, that increase our sense of contentment and flourishing, and that help us weather life’s inevitable adversities (Nozick, 1990; Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It encompasses more than just individual subjective experience, too, extending to the

study of positive traits and positive institutions, contending that the environment we navigate significantly influences our optimism, sense of hope, resilience, and overall thriving (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The study (and importantly, application) of well-being science makes intuitive sense to many today, yet this was not always the case. In fact, until the 1980s and 1990s the academic and clinical field of psychology remained medically-oriented, a study of pathology, damage, and deficit, with a goal of treatment and ultimately absence of illness (Maddux, 2021). At that time, an individual was considered to be mentally healthy if they did not experience overtly negative conditions including anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges (Ryff, 1995). Gradually, in the 1960s and 1970s, the field shifted from treatment of illness toward prevention thereof (Maddux, 2021).

Let me bring this down from academic theory into real terms: I would never hope for my dearest friends to *solely* heal from harm, to reach mental health lucidity only, or for that matter to endure years in an unfulfilling job or a tolerable romantic partnership: I want my friends to blossom with vitality, to feel purposeful in their work and beloved in their relationships, to both heal from harm and to thrive beyond that. I want this for myself too, and all people. This baseline of stability is where traditional psychology ends and positive psychology picks up, moving the needle beyond stability and into the good life (Maddux, 2021; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In positive psychology this is sometimes called the reversible cape: the necessary red side of the cape for healing and support through times of adversity, the equally crucial green side for boosting positive emotions, relationships, experiences, and overall sense of well-being (Pawelski, 2016b). Being a friend is in part a call to wear this reversable cape.

With the publication of Dr. Martin Seligman's seminal book *Learned Optimism* (1990) and Dr. Carol Ryff's call to view "mental health as the presence of the positive" (1995, p. 99), the field of psychology research and practice began to explicitly expand from its entrenched stance on treatment and prevention of illness, toward the enhancement of comprehensive health and well-being (Maddux, 2021). Subsequently, in 1998, Seligman, then-President of the American Psychological Association, campaigned the body to focus more on individual, relational, and organizational strengths, resilience, and goals in pursuit of well-being (Seligman, 2011). Along with prominent psychologists and researchers Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Christopher Peterson, and Ed Diener, Seligman urged psychologists and academics to study the science of well-being (Peterson, 2006), and build green cape-style interventions that enable individuals to increase their well-being in the moment and over time, also known as *positive psychology interventions* (Compton, 2005; Pawelski, 2016a, 2016b; Seligman, 2011).

Seligman's proposal caught fire. In the intervening decades, extensive research and resulting theoretical frameworks emerged, outlining important components of a flourishing life. Positive psychology's scope is vast, and the research spans a wide variety of topics, such as optimism (Carver et al., 2010; Mens et al., 2021; Peterson & Steen, 2021; Seligman, 2006), agency (Seligman, 2021), self-determination and self-efficacy (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Chen et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2016; Maddux & Kleiman, 2021), resilience and post-traumatic growth (Cutuli et al., 2021; Gillham et al., 2013; Reivich & Shatté, 2003), belonging and mattering (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Jeglic et al., 2016; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021), grit (Duckworth et al., 2007), growth mindset (Dweck, 1999; Yeager et al., 2019), positive habits such as mindfulness and movement (Garland et al., 2015; Ratey & Loehr, 2011; Wheeler et al., 2017; Wood & Neal, 2016), character strengths (Niemi, 2018, 2019;

Niemiec & Pearce, 2021; Park, 2021), the well-being benefits of the humanities (De Botton & Armstrong, 2013; Pawelski, 2022; Tay & Pawelski, 2022; Westgate & Oishi, 2022), positive organizations (Dutton, 2003; Stephens et al., 2011), positive development across the life span (English & Carstensen, 2014; Levy, 2022; Vaillant & Mukamal, 2001), and more.

Positive psychology practitioners devise theories and frameworks that operationalize the research, making it actionable for the broader public. A popular, empirically-informed model of well-being is the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), which encompasses positive emotions, engagement or flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), relationships, meaning, and achievement. Each component is multifaceted, and complicated further by the fact that there is no singular definition of success within each. In fact, well-being is subjective, in part influenced by each individual's own cognitive and emotional evaluation of their own lives (Diener et al., 2017; Oishi et al., 2018).

Given how much our subjective well-being is influenced by our assessment of our emotions, it is fitting that PERMA starts there. According to the *broaden and build theory*, positive emotions (including the “top ten” positive emotions of joy, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, gratitude, love, awe, serenity, interest) expand our perspectives and develop our resources and have a significant impact on our relationships, health, and learning (Fredrickson, 2009, 2013; Rand & Touza, 2021). Positive emotions can generate in us a sense of self-efficacy, where we believe our skills can meet challenges at hand (Maddux & Kleiman, 2021). Engaging these skills in the moment can create positive experiences of unity, timelessness, and full presence, also called flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which can induce strong sense of achievement (Hays, 2012; Locke, 1996; Maddux & Kleiman, 2021; Seligman, 2011).

Furthermore, a sense of meaning and achievement drives deep satisfaction with life and provides framing that can support resilience when confronted with adversity (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1963; Smith, 2017; Steger, 2021). Relationships, too, help us cope through times of adversity—called *social support*—enhancing resilience and boosting positive emotions, sense of purpose, and the green cape side of well-being (Gable et al., 2011; Gable & Maisel, 2021; Kashdan et al., 2018; Sheldon et al., 2011; Wells et al., 2022). Connection with others generates extensive benefits for physical, mental, emotional, and societal health (Reis & Gable, 2003). It is hard to overstate the impact of relationships on well-being, holding true across cultures, contexts, and—perhaps unsurprisingly—life stage and age.

Review of the Literature on Intergenerational Friendship

Just as traditional, early-to-mid 20th century psychology focused on individual pathologies and relational and environmental deficits, much of the research on relationships focuses on the many ways in which relationships can go awry (Reis & Gable, 2003). After all, bad news sells! While important to investigate and alleviate negative or toxic interpersonal relationships, this is not the whole story of social connection. Most social interactions are at least neutral, and most people report general satisfaction with their relationships (Reis & Gable, 2003). As positive psychology focuses on inherent strengths and development of positive states, traits, and experiences, so, too, does this exploration of intergenerational friendship, focusing on the positive effects of intergenerational friendship more so than the problems it may alleviate. Indeed, my hope is that general exploration of the benefits of relationships—intergenerational ones included—can promote the formation of positive relationships that help to mitigate impacts of isolation, loneliness, and discrimination.

Positive psychology is not all rainbows and unicorns, however. It recognizes that positive relationships take work to initiate and maintain, all operating within political, social, economic, and physical environments and systems not under our exclusive control. This section explores the research of the positive impact of social connection, friendship, and intergenerational friendship, as well as some of the obstacles to these relationships.

Social Connection and Well-Being

At the core of a good life is social connection. Almost every psychological theory of human flourishing and eudaimonic well-being includes positive relationships or social connection as a central component (Reis & Gable, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Social connection encompasses the structural, functional, and quality elements of social relationships along a continuum; this includes, respectively, the size of a social network and number of social roles, actual or perceived accessibility of social support and resources, and the level of satisfaction or strain in relationships (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). As a category, social connection need not be deep and sustained to offer benefits; in fact, research indicates that 40 seconds is enough time to benefit from a positive social interaction, characterized as a high-quality connection (Fogarty et al., 1999). These short, zesty experiences of high-quality connections inject a sense of vitality, mutuality, and positive regard into a social interaction among two or more people (Stephens et al., 2011), nourishing not just temporary happiness but contributing to long-term well-being, too. Although we later focus on the deeper and sustained social connection of friendship, in this section we continue to explore the benefits of generic, positive social connection.

Evidence shows that positive social connections do not only correlate with a sense of subjective well-being but can *predict* the experience of subjective well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Oishi, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The presence of fulfilling social

connections serves as the strongest indicator of overall life satisfaction when compared to other domains such as career or finances, and across different cultures and ages (Oishi & Diener, 2001). Levels of social relatedness have an outsized impact on general levels of happiness (Klinger, 1977); this is a prominent differentiating factor between people who experience very high levels of happiness (e.g., the top quartile) and people who experience less happiness (e.g., the bottom quartile) (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Happiness can be contagious, it turns out: The influence of any individual's happiness extends to a network of individuals up to three degrees of separation (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

Our need for social connection goes deeper than seeking happiness: it is evolutionary (Berscheid, 2003). Social connection fulfills crucial functions indispensable for survival, such as safety, gathering food efficiently, and more (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). The primal need for social support and connection to at least one close individual begins as an infant. John Bowlby's *attachment theory* demonstrates that early childhood behaviors are founded on the dual needs for safety and exploration (Bowlby, 1979; Haidt, 2006; Harlow, 1958). According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015), the presence of one trusted adult in a child's life is one of the biggest predictors of the child's resilience in the face of adversity. When a parent gives a child a secure, safe, loving haven, the child matures with a source of strength from which to explore, emote, and engage in larger communities, and this can lead to good relationships with others (Peterson, 2006). Peer relationships in childhood and adolescence provide essential resources for socioemotional and cognitive development, and adults who engage in positive socializing see an increase in positive mood more than most other activities (Reis et al., 2000). Indeed, the link between social connection and well-being holds at every

stage of human development, and is an especially crucial dimension of positive aging (Vaillant, 2015).

Many of our most central, basic processes of cognition, emotion, and motivation throughout the lifespan are regulated by and responsive to interpersonal engagement (Reis et al., 2000; Reis & Gable, 2003). So attuned are we to others that even perceiving potential support from at least one other close relationship is correlated with a decrease in anxiety in challenging situations (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Relationships are essential to coping with stress and uncertainty, identity formation, self-concept expansion, and fulfillment of both individual and collective goals, providing the background functioning of and influence over most major psychological processes (Reis & Gable, 2003). For example, social support—even from just one person—increases our sense of self-efficacy (Gable & Gosnell, 2011), the empowering belief in our own ability to use our skills in a given circumstance (Maddux & Kleiman, 2021), and a key driver for setting and accomplishing our goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). For these and so many more reasons, connection is consistently one of the strongest, and often *the* strongest source of psychological health and well-being (Berscheid, 2003).

One mechanism for the positive psychological impacts of relationships is through meaning-making. The fourth component of PERMA, *meaning*, is a sense of purpose, significance, and/or coherence, and it is a core component of life satisfaction (Oishi & Diener, 2001). Research by King, Heintzman, & Ward et al. (2016) indicates that people who perceive that their lives have a sense of meaning also experience a sense of connection, belongingness, and support within their social networks. The knowledge that a loved one thinks of, cares about, and would act for you, instills a sense of belonging (Smith, 2017). Indeed, most people mention

close relationships more than other factors when describing what gives their life meaning (Reis & Gable, 2003).

Relationships benefit not just mental health but physical health, too; they help us live longer. A meta-analysis of 148 longitudinal studies revealed a strong positive correlation between social interaction and mental and physical health, indicating that quality and quantity of social connection have a significant predictive impact on mortality (Holt-Lundstad, 2021). Through a review of 81 studies, Uchino et al. (1996) found that social support and integration buffers us against the physical effects of stress, identifying a consistent, positive correlation between social connection and the body's cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems. Social support may encourage health-protecting behaviors, like exercise or medication adherence (Reis et al., 2000). These are just a few of the myriad physical benefits of positive social connection.

While the good news of social connection is very good, the bad news of lacking social connection is equally bad. Feelings of loneliness have a strong negative correlation with subjective well-being (VanderWeele et al., 2011). Social isolation and its related feelings of disconnection and loneliness are correlated with significant mental health challenges (Cacioppo et al., 2010). Just as perceived social support buffers the effects of stress, perceived social threats such as loneliness may catalyze inflammation in the body, leading to an array of physical, cognitive, and mental ailments (Cacioppo et al., 2010). Feelings of loneliness are associated with negative physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral impacts including poor sleep, diminished resilience, behavioral withdrawal, lower likeliness to seek emotional support, and more (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2007).

This research on loneliness has current implications for all of us, even if we are not the ones feeling isolated ourselves. Social isolation and feelings of loneliness are on the rise, across the lifespan from adolescence through all stages of adulthood, and across the globe (Cacioppo et al., 2011; Cudjoe et al., 2020; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2007; V. H. Murthy, 2021). We all likely know someone who is isolated and feels lonely, regardless of whether we know that about them. In fact, approximately 25% of Americans state that they lack a single friend in whom they can confide or discuss important matters, a figure that tripled between 1985-2004 (McPherson et al., 2006). Tragically, the effects of loneliness accumulate throughout a lifetime and accelerate the pace of physiological deterioration over time (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2007). The Surgeon General of the United States, Vivek Murthy, called loneliness a public health emergency reaching epidemic levels, so much a crisis that his office released an entire report to discuss the negative impacts and potential ways to address it (Murthy, 2023).

While the causes of the loneliness epidemic are myriad, and the solutions at scale are complicated, each of us can do our part to alleviate the pain of loneliness that we feel or others around us feel by reaching out to those in our networks and neighborhoods to check in, offer social support, share a laugh and a meal, or go for a walk together. Over time, these small acts of outreach may turn into deeper connections—and may even lead to friendship. It is well worth the effort: Connection with others is at the core of human flourishing across cultures and contexts (Peterson, 2006), with myriad extensively-documented health and well-being benefits.

The Construct of Friendship

As important as connection is, it takes cognitive, emotional, temporal, and often even physical and financial effort. Deeper connection that is sustained over time does not simply fall into our laps. Often, but not always, this type of effortful and sustained connection leads to

friendship—a social construct we all might define differently. What is friendship? And why should we put in the effort above and beyond simple, positive contact with loose connections or workplace interactions?

Defining Friendship

As with any construct, context matters (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). This is especially true with friendship, where cultural, environmental, historical, religious, gender, and other factors define the norms, expectations, values, and consequences of friendship. Thus, friendship theories and definitions abound. Hojatt & Moyer (2017) extol friendship as an effortful engagement stemming from a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, requiring numerous skills, with various objectives. With this broad definition, friendship is a complex act that benefits from explicit purpose, repeated practice, and appropriate amounts of pleasure. Adams et al. (2000) affirm the myriad definitions and distill friendship to a “commonly understood” non-binding, voluntary, informal connection, devoid of institutionalization or formal regulations imposed by contracts, governments, or policies. Rather, friendship is a deliberate choice, characterized by mutual selection, reciprocity, pleasure, and egalitarianism within a personal relationship. Equity theory posits that close relationships, such as friendships, endure when both people in them perceive a fair, reciprocal balance between the benefits they receive from the relationship and the efforts they invest in it over time (Berscheid et al., 1973). While equity theory has its limitations, such as explaining acts of altruism or the different value people place on certain actions (Peterson, 2006), it still points us toward the sense of belonging and *mattering* in a relationship, what Isaac Prilleltensky (2021, p. 268) describes as “feel valued and add value.”

Centuries of philosophers and researchers have explored the constituent elements of initiating, deepening, and sustaining friendship, as well as the values and virtues of friendship. In

Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle (350 B.C.E./2019) distinguishes three types of friendship: friendships of utility, friendships of virtue, and friendships of pleasure. These types of friendship may exist separately or not; imagine, the friend you only see at concerts, versus the friend you can call on for a shoulder to cry on after a break-up. Both friendships can comprise all three types of friendship, though each facet might not be present in every moment. Although a friendship flowers from experiencing pleasure, or *hedonia*, through shared interests, joint activities, and joy found in one another's successes, the deepest type of mutual friendship is based on a sense of shared meaning, or *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./2019). This development of shared meaning is the purpose and profound benefit of deep, positive friendship.

Aristotle (350 B.C.E./2019) elucidates that meaningful friendship requires a mutual recognition and accounting between friends that their engagement with one another forms a shared narrative. Lori Gallegos (2022) agrees, positing that successfully shared meaning is a result of both affective and cognitive empathy, allowing us to respond better to the needs of our friends. As friends make mutual decisions, share pleasures together in experiences, and support one another through life's challenges, the affective and practical consequences that result are also shared.

Aristotle (B.C.E./2019) describes true friends as those who contribute to building one another's character strengths, and who value one another based on their character, the concept of *moral will*. He posited that friendship rests on similarity of character between friends, and knowledge of the character of your friend helps you hold a mirror to your own character, both strengths and weaknesses, such that friendships enhance our understanding of ourselves. Certain character strengths—the 24 positive, relatively stable personality traits that demonstrate our virtues in action through behavior (Niemić, 2018)—are particularly correlated with friendship.

These include love, kindness, social intelligence, honesty, humor, and teamwork (Wagner, 2019). The act of befriending requires the give and take of being a friend to someone else and receiving their acts of friendship. No matter the type of friendship, whether friendship of utility, virtue, or pleasure (or any combination thereof), there is a contribution and a receiving, all predicated upon shared values important to the individuals pursuing friendship.

By leveraging character strengths and strengthening our moral will through our friendships, we catalyze a positive process within our self-concept, what Aron et al. (1991) call *self-expansion*. *Self-expansion theory* explains the process by which we incorporate close relationships into our personal identity, including embracing the resources, perspectives, and characteristics of the friend. It posits that our inherent motivation to expand our sense of self-concept is at the core of formation and maintenance of relationships. The theory further explains that the act of self-expansion itself is rewarding and generates positive emotions (Aron et al., 1991).

Positive emotions and pleasure are an important aspect of friendship, and indeed an important aspect of thriving that is crucial to Aristotle's (350 B.C.E./2019) definition of friendship. Without the joy of sharing a delicious meal, awe at a harmonious concert, or laughter over the phone, a social connection is just that—and not a friendship. Indeed, the concept of *positivity resonance*, high-quality moments of interpersonal connection that evoke shared positive emotion, broadens our individual awareness to focus on others, and builds social bonds (Schneider & Fredrickson, 2022), enhancing friendship. In fact, one study by Peterson (2006) found that individuals described their best friend as the person with whom they had a reciprocated and sustained relationship *marked by positive emotions*. When describing these friends, people used adjectives such as dependable, honest, loyal, committed, loving, kind,

playful and fun—in some ways aligning with the principles of both attachment theory and equity theory in the construct of friendship (Peterson, 2006).

Just as positivity resonance invites us into joy, laughter, love, and inspiration from our friend's successes, similarly, the inevitable sorrows our friends experience can also become our sorrows (Gallegos, 2022). Rather than walk away from this sorrow in search of solely friendships of pleasure, being emotionally available—offering a friendship of utility and virtue in a time of need—can deepen social connection and the benefits thereof (Gallegos, 2022). This offering and receiving of social support is one of the mechanisms by which positive friendships decrease our stress and promote resilience when faced with adversity. The silver lining of our sorrows is that it gives our friends a chance to offer their love and support, and for us to receive it. This is a balm and a boost to well-being for both the helper and the receiver across all stages of life.

Friendship Across the Lifespan

It bears repeating that context matters in defining friendship, and so it follows context matters when exploring friendship across the lifespan. Social scientists have developed classifications for different friendship patterns and styles, shedding light on how friendships form, sustain, and, to a lesser extent, end (O'Dare et al., 2019). One well-known classification by Matthews (1986) includes three types and styles of friendships: The *independent* type, characterized by having numerous friends but lacking a desire for deep connections, the *discerning* type who has a small circle of close friends but is reluctant to form new relationships, and the *acquisitive* type who maintains existing friendships while actively seeking new ones. Although these types have implications on friendship (and thus, well-being) throughout the lifespan, such generalizations may not apply so broadly in a rapidly changing world, as economic, social, and political conditions shift, and social media changes how people connect

and view friendship. Social media notwithstanding, it is nonetheless valuable to explore how friendship patterns evolve throughout the lifespan, to set a stronger foundation for understanding intergenerational friendships.

Children develop friendships at a surprisingly young age, and up to 75% of nursery school students have reciprocal friendships (Peterson, 2006). These early friendships tend to revolve around shared activities, primarily play, and typically involve 1-2 friends for toddlers. As children enter primary school they more than double their quantity of friendships, with an average of 3-5 friends (Peterson, 2006). By adolescence, the percentage of teenagers with mutual friendships rises to 80-90%, and they begin to differentiate between “good” friends and “best” friends. In this stage of life, friendships expand beyond shared activities and encompass emerging emotional and social support, as well as increasing amounts of self-disclosure (Blieszner, 2014; Peterson, 2006).

Academic, workplace, parenting, and neighborhood environments most often catalyze and shape adult friendship. Young adulthood is the stage of life wherein people have the largest circle of friends, peaking from 7-9 close friends, and over 90% of adults at that stage state they have friends (Blieszner, 2014; Peterson, 2006). Cognitive processes have a role here: Research from the Harvard Study of Adult Development found that adaptive, healthy mechanisms for coping with stress, such as altruism and humor, become more salient as people transition from adolescence into adulthood, a factor that can be measured by the quality of their relationships (Vaillant, 2000). Quantity of friendship declines from there, and in middle adulthood, people report an average of five close friends. Albeit gradually, the decline in quantity of friendship continues throughout and into old age (Carstensen et al., 1999).

Research documents the decreasing size and composition of social networks as people age into older adulthood. Discussions about this often have a pallor of ageism about them; the thinking goes like this: “Some older people may be constrained in friendship formation due to a lack of mobility, ill-health or being socially isolated. In other words, the inability to form (sufficient, quality) friendships emerges...as a form of ‘disability’ that older adults might be affected by” (O’Dare et al., 2019, p. 4). Catherine Elliott O’Dare (2019) disputes this, arguing that some researchers, herself included, see strong evidence that older adults strive to overcome these perceived barriers and desire friendship. Blieszner et al. suggest “movement across phases of friendship is fluid and potentially bidirectional” (2019, p. 5), indicating the shifting perspective of research on older adult friendship. Furthermore, a groundbreaking, 16-year-long, longitudinal study revealed that most older participants expressed a willingness and actively sought opportunities to forge and maintain friendships (Jerome & Wenger, 1999).

Socioemotional selectivity theory takes this positive view on age-related friendship changes a step further, suggesting the shift to smaller social networks allows for an increase in emotional intimacy within the relationships maintained (Carstensen et al., 1999; English & Carstensen, 2014). The theory further posits that these changes are positive and adaptive; as we age and perceive time to be more limited, we place a higher priority on emotional regulation and well-being, and moderate our social connections to ensure those around us share the deeper intimacy we seek. In contrast, when we are younger and perceive time as more open-ended, our social goals focus on knowledge acquisition (Carstensen et al., 1999; English & Carstensen, 2014). *Socioemotional selectivity theory* demonstrates that the shifting nature of time perception as we age moves our locus of motivation in seeking social connection from knowledge acquisition towards emotional intimacy (English & Carstensen, 2014). The implications for

intergenerational friendship formation are clear—social motivation changes over time and may create a mismatch between any two people.

Or are they? According to Reis & Gable (2003, p. 147), “Among people’s diverse social goals, intimacy tends to have high priority across the lifespan.” *Intimacy theory* outlines key qualities that play a central role in fostering a sense of closeness and connection with others, including revealing essential aspects of oneself, particularly emotions, through verbal and nonverbal communication, perceiving that our relationships are responsive to our needs, and understanding, validation, and a sense of being cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Furthermore, most people share core values of trust, respect, and support in their friendships regardless of age (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). Gratitude, an age-agnostic cognitive and emotional tool, promotes relationship formation and maintenance at any age (Algoe & Haidt, 2009).

Friendships among older adults are viewed and framed in a distinct manner compared to friendship in other life stages. Research on friendships among older people highlights the significant advantages of these connections *for older people*, emphasizing their role in fostering inclusivity and enhancing older people’s psychological and physical well-being (Blieszner, 2014). This is important research with important, practical applications. Yet it teeters on the edge of ageism, reinforcing tired stereotypes that older people need younger people in order to stay *au courant*. In fact, older people benefit from friendship with their peers just as younger adults benefit from “age homophilic” friendships, *and* benefit from age-diverse friendships, too—just as younger adults do. While there are numerous ways to engage in friendship over the lifespan, the features and structures of friendship may shift over time, but having positive friends consistently, robustly correlates with life satisfaction and well-being at any age (Reis & Gable, 2003).

Friendship Homophily and Ageism

Positive relationships are not positive at every moment. They can be complicated and can sometimes hurt—and that hurt can even turn into harm. From daily annoyances such as irritations or pet-peeves all the way through criticism, betrayal, or explicit or implicit rejection, these challenges can create conflict and activate negative emotions like anger or shame (Vangelisti, 2009). Friendships with those who drain, judge, undercut, or otherwise hurt us subtract more from our well-being bank account than positive friendships deposit (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). These negative friendships violate the desired elements of mutuality, reciprocity, and affection within relationships (Peterson, 2006). Furthermore, across the lifespan, from childhood into adulthood, the emotional consequences of social rejection outweigh the positive emotional impact of social acceptance, which can lead to negative impacts on psychological health (Burnes et al., 2019; Reis & Gable, 2003).

Like the cumulative impact of a thousand papercuts, social rejection damages our well-being in countless ways. In addition to being flat-out morally wrong, discrimination and other forms of social rejection (including but not limited to phobias and *-isms* such as racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, classism, ageism, etc.) disconnect us from one another (Burnes et al., 2019). Beyond causing social separation, isolation and feelings of loneliness, discriminatory beliefs can stoke fear that elicits harmful and damaging behaviors. Much can be said about each of these categories and how they intersect, though for the purpose of this research this paper primarily focuses on the impact of ageism, and its specific impact on friendship.

One of the most common and outwardly acceptable biases in the United States is ageism (Palmore, 2001), or discriminatory or prejudicial actions or attitudes founded on chronological

age (Burnes et al., 2019). As with other negative biases, ageism can result in negative impacts on health and well-being of anyone targeted by it (Burnes et al., 2019). Worse still, ageism is commonly accepted in American society such that we swim amid this culture of pervasive, normalized discrimination that affects all ages, such as body care products and social media photo filters marketed to make us desire fewer wrinkles, presumptions in health care and the workplace, in schools, and community services. The University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging surveyed a nationally representative sample of adults ages 50-80 years old about their encounters with ageism. A large majority of older adults, 82%, reported regularly experiencing at least one form of ageism, whether internally-directed ageist beliefs, interpersonal experiences of ageism, or at the societal and institutional level (Malani et al., 2020). Ageism creates barriers to intergenerational friendship, denying so many the benefits of this profound form of positive relationship.

Friendship represents a unique blend of personal connections and social dynamics. While it is inherently personal and based on individual choices, it is also significantly influenced by societal norms and structures (Thomas, 2019). The voluntary nature of friendship, with the relative freedom to enter and exit the relationship, often leads to the formation of social connections within existing social structures. For example age, life stage, or socio-economic characteristics contribute to homogeneity within social networks (Thomas, 2019).

Social influence, support, and information flow play crucial roles within these informal social networks, all of which contribute to boundary formation defining in-group and out-group dynamics. These boundaries can reinforce group segregation and contribute to intergroup inequality (Thomas, 2019). The exchange of ideas, assistance, and social connections within these networks can both strengthen existing group dynamics (e.g., mutual aid within a

marginalized community) and potentially exacerbate disparities between different social groups (e.g., younger and older people) (Thomas, 2019). Aversive, ageist media stereotypes of out-of-touch old people and indifferent young people create false boundaries between the generations. They may perpetuate a story that the two groups will not like one another, and erect barriers to intergenerational friendship formation. For example, according to Williams and Nussbaum (2013) some older adults feel as though they are expected to socialize primarily with same-age peers or risk being labeled “weird” or judged for trying to act younger. It is not hard to envision this occurs with younger people too, creating a logical thread for why age-diverse friendship may be aversive to some who seek to protect themselves from potential social rejection.

Age homophily is ubiquitous in friendship, though recent research from Europe is cracking that façade by demonstrating intergenerational friendships are both undercounted and on the rise (O’Dare et al., 2021). According to Adams et al. (2000), adults of similar age and proximity tend to face similar challenges, undergo comparable joys and griefs, and possess comparable educational and financial resources that result in similar status, which may drive a sense of belonging and unity. Consequently, age-related differences in temporal perspectives, as in *socioemotional selectivity theory*, and generational life experiences may make intergenerational friendship less likely. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) suggest that lasting and intimate friendships are more prone to develop among individuals raised in the same generation, particularly if they were established in childhood.

Of course, age homophily is not simply a personal choice. It is crafted by societal factors that segregates individuals into age-homogeneous environments, such as retirement communities or young professional societies, what Reuben Thomas calls “structurally induced homophily” (2019, p. 823) across the life course. While there are benefits to these age-homophilic

communities, this also limits opportunities for age and life-stage-diverse interpersonal engagement. No wonder, then, young adults described their close friends as those quite close in age to themselves (Peterson, 2006) and baby boomer friendships are mostly age-homogeneous (Adams & Blieszner, 1998). Hence, this structurally induced age homophily creates clear physical, psychological, and emotional barriers to intergenerational friendship formation, and even intergenerational friendship research.

What can be done about internalized, interpersonal, and institutionalized ageism? Positive psychology research and frameworks offer mechanisms for reducing ageism through shifting perspectives, including methods for increasing perspective-giving-and-taking, empathy, meaning-making, and social engagement. The ability to understand another perspective, what Bruneau & Saxe (2012) call *perspective-taking*, offers significant well-being benefits. While these individual actions may eventually lead to societal change, Reis & Gable (2003) suggest that positive processes in relationships (such as intergenerational friendships) may be empirically under researched and consequently underappreciated.

Intergenerational Friendship

In the United States, where age homophily is a social norm in friendship, it can be hard for people of two different generations to meet, establish, and maintain a friendship outside of a family unit or neighborhood. Until recently, research on friendship predominantly focused on and promoted these norms (O'Dare et al., 2019). While intergenerational friendship is likely more common than the research reflects, it remains poorly understood and under-explored (O'Dare, 2017).

This section explores the (limited) academic literature on the benefits of intergenerational friendship between adults, which is generally defined as voluntary, sustained engagement

between two people over 18 years old who were born to different societal generations, and thus, have at least 15-20 years of age difference between them. It does not explore the more extensive literature on intergenerational contact between young kids and the very old—while somewhat common, these types of contact are outside the scope of this research agenda.

Intergenerational friendships offer benefits to both the younger and older adults within the friendship, though most research focuses on the older half of the friendship (O'Dare et al., 2021). To be sure, intergenerational friendship can shift how older people see themselves, as worthy of notice, value, and engagement with people outside their age group (Levy, 2022). Moving older adults from the periphery of society into the center of a social network via friendship can increase their sense of happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Engaging older adults in intergenerational friendship can help to combat ageist beliefs and behaviors within *both* parties in the friendship, as expansion of self-concept and outlook by way of engagement with age-diverse perspectives is in and of itself a boon to well-being (Aron et al., 1991).

Rather than view age homophily in friendship as a death knell for intergenerational friendship, O'Dare et al. (2021, p. 68) propose an updated view of the concept called *homophily of doing-and-being*. Through a study of intergenerational friendships, O'Dare et al. (2021) noted homophily of doing-and-being includes three key aspects, including engaging as “friends in action” through shared interests and leisure activities, transcending age-related identities to be seen as more than “just old,” and aligning attitudes and approaches to friendship and life. Reframing differences between people of different generations as a potential positive attribute, *homophily of doing-and-being* also suggests that differences plays a significant, positive role in fostering interest and attraction between intergenerational friends (O'Dare et al., 2021). This

challenge to age homophily in friendship formation and maintenance is a fantastic start to the next stage of intergenerational friendship research.

As exciting as the homophily of doing-and-being framework is as a reconceptualization (and perhaps slight rebuke) of the predominance of age homophily in friendship, the initial study by O'Dare et al. (2021) from which it emerged focused only on the older adults within intergenerational friendships. Beautiful, poignant themes and stories emerged about the impacts of intergenerational friendship on the older adults within the friendships, such as how much older friends enjoy guiding and advising younger friends, how much more playful, creative, and carefree older adults feel they can be with their younger friends relative to their peer-age friends, and how they decrease their age awareness when in their friendships and instead experience a sense of “all-age identity...and they draw on these as resources in their intergenerational friendships” (O'Dare et al., 2021, p. 78). In many ways, viewing intergenerational friendship through the lens of *homophily of doing-and-being* rather than age homophily and ageism, is akin to the emergence of positive psychology from the pre-2000s deficit- and pathology-focused field of psychology.

While O'Dare et al.'s (2021) study did not explicitly explore the impact of intergenerational friendship from the younger adult side, it does invite future research into it, reporting some ancillary findings about the benefits of intergenerational friendship for younger adults. For example, younger adults like to reciprocate advice they receive from their older friends, by seeking to guide and advise their older friends about contemporary news including social justice movements, technology advances, and pop culture. Another mechanism by which younger adults benefit from intergenerational friendship is through the *positivity effect*, the transition from a tendency to focus on negative information during youth toward an inclination

toward seeking positive information in older age (Reed & Carstensen, 2012). Friendship with older adults can thus help younger adults attune to and remember positive information more than negative information, which may in turn increase their sense of positive emotions and optimism.

It is difficult and not comprehensive to ascribe a finite set of parameters to which all friendships, intergenerational or not, abide. Instead, we can look to the benefits of this valuable type of friendship and explore the virtues that they share. Many theories and frameworks, including *homophily of being-and-doing*, posit and present evidence that intergenerational friendships offer multiple benefits for the older half of the friendship dyads. It is very likely that the advantages of this type of positive relationship are numerous for younger and middle-age adults, too, though these are not well-documented. What are these advantages of cross-generation friendship for the younger half of the friendship dyads? What follows are the results of a small study exploring the unique advantages of intergenerational friendship for adults who have friends at least 20 years their elders.

Research and Methodology

The research on intergenerational friendships is nascent yet increasingly valuable as the world's population ages. My intention in conducting a qualitative study on the topic is to contribute to this emerging body of work and spark potential directions for subsequent, broader research. Not to mention, talking with people about their friendships is deliciously fun and life affirming. Let me take a moment to recommend that you intentionally ask your friends to tell you what they receive from their friendship with you, and what they feel they offer you as a friend. It may just boost your well-being and imbue your relationship with additional positive emotion, shared meaning, and deeper connection.

I set out to study intergenerational friendship with two key questions: Do intergenerational friendships confer unique advantages to the individuals within them, relative to age-homophilic friendships? If so, what are those benefits? I also developed tertiary questions about intergenerational friendship formation and maintenance, the individual's overall social network, and other contextual considerations. The University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board approved my request to pursue these questions through 8-15 qualitative, one-on-one interviews.

I developed a very low-friction, digital eligibility criteria form for interview candidates to complete, which included two questions: 1) Are you between the ages of 18-89 years old? and 2) Are you engaged in a friendship with an adult who is at least 20 years older or younger than you? Eligible candidates were automatically directed to book an interview appointment on my digital calendar. Friends and classmates generously posted the link to the eligibility form on their social media pages; I was shocked and thrilled to have 58 interview appointments booked within just a few hours. Elated and a bit overwhelmed, I turned the eligibility criteria form into a wait list, and within four days over 300 people signed up. From this I learned there is untapped interest in talking about intergenerational friendship, and I also learned that offering a \$25 incentive for completing the interview is a strong draw for many. After discovering that many of the individuals who booked the initial 58 appointments may have been internet bots (and chalking that up to a neophyte researcher learning curve!), I ultimately narrowed down the interview candidate pool to a convenience sample comprised of ten individuals within 1-2 levels of acquaintance to me.

The heterogeneous group of ten interviewees included men and women aged 32-69, nine individuals from the United States and one from the Philippines. Of the group of ten, five

identified as White, one as mixed-ethnic background, one as Hispanic, and three as Asian, half of whom spoke languages in addition to English. Each interview over the Zoom video-conference platform took between 50-75 minutes, including a review of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) and guided by a general flow of interview questions across three categories: demographics and context, patterns and characteristics of their friendships overall, and exploration of 1-2 of their most “fulfilling” intergenerational friendships (Appendix C). Video recordings and transcripts captured the interview subject responses for later review.

For the interviews, I leveraged principles from grounded theory methodology, a process that help researchers to unveil themes from ongoing data collection and analysis (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Grounded theory works well in a niche study such as intergenerational friendship, where there is not already extensive research and data in the field of study. The grounded theory process thus allowed me to start with questions, rather than a hypothesis, and uncover patterns and core concepts through each subsequent interview. Immediately after each interview, I noted the most important concepts from the conversation, keywords the interview subject used repeatedly, and stories that the interview subject emphasized as integral to the intergenerational friendship. I pulled quotes from the transcripts that represented the identified themes, keywords, and stories. As subsequent interviews unfolded, I saw patterns emerge from multiple interviews. For example, I noticed a theme of being drawn to older people from an early age, and thereafter asked open-ended questions to explore this deeper with interview participants. In this manner, I explored themes as they arose during interviews, rather than shoehorning emergent concepts into other frameworks. I initially hoped, and now post-analysis I believe, that the themes I identified and the resulting questions that emerged, could be the basis for future

research. The next section offers a view into the concepts, keywords, and stories that ten adults from the age of 32 years old to 69 years old shared with me about their beloved older friends.

Why Intergenerational Friendships Matter

Imagine an ice cream sundae with three layers: social connection is the base layer of vanilla ice cream, a strong foundation; friendship is the second layer, a deliciously sweet chocolate sauce; and intergenerational friendship between people with at least 20 years of age difference is the third layer—the cherry on top of the ice cream sundae of friendships. Each part is sweet, and each part contributes to the whole. Here we focus on the cherry on top.

All ten stories below derive directly from the ten conversations I had with adults who shared their stories of intergenerational friendship, in addition to my own story at the end. To protect anonymity, I assign each friend a pseudonym, though the quotes and stories herein are all theirs. Interesting and heartwarming themes emerged from these conversations, and they structure the stories below into the following sections: *Acceptance for who I am and who I am growing into, mentorship plus, niche enthusiasm, and perspective and personal navigation*. In the subsequent Discoveries section, I describe these themes in more detail, as well as share secondary themes and characteristics I noticed along the way. Of course, it is not possible to distill the entirety of the interview participants' intergenerational friendships into any single category, so it is important to note that each of the stories below is condensed for brevity and clarity, but most have overlap across the themes and could have found a home in any of these five primary categorical benefits of intergenerational friendship. Let's dig in.

Acceptance for Who I Am and Who I'm Growing Into

Leanne's Friendships with Elaine and Joanne

“Leanne,” age 64, a white woman residing in Santa Fe, NM, calls herself “the luckiest person when it comes to friends.” Leanne’s rich life experiences include teaching at the university level and publishing a graphic novel, and she enjoys her current role as a substitute teacher while pursuing her artistic passions, spending time with her friends, and reading. Although drawn to friends of all ages who possess a “positive life force,” from a young age Leanne says she specifically “sought out the company of old people. They gave me tea, cookies, and books, and they were happy to see me...That was important to me, because I didn’t really have an elder, like a grandmother in my life.”

Today, Leanne has friends from generations both older and younger than she, as well as similar-age friends. Her friends share common characteristics, which Leanne describes as strong intuition, emotional intelligence, honesty, fun, and grace with others. Within the friendships, Leanne feels a profound sense of love, acceptance, and psychological safety that allows her to be her authentic self. She says, “I feel like they see the best in me...but they know the worst in me, too, and I like that...I can continue to grow by interacting with them, even in situations that are uncomfortable.” And she returns her friends’ deep love and honesty in equal measure, offering fierce loyalty, saying “I’m really solid for people,” and meeting their playfulness with her quick wit.

Leanne’s closest friendships with older generations blossomed in the academic setting in Anchorage, Alaska. As a second-year faculty member, Leanne was establishing her academic career when Elaine, a successful psychology professor arrived at the university. Leanne and Elaine became “immediate friends” the moment they met. Elaine’s social, playful, and

adventurous nature drew Leanne in, exclaiming, “She had guts like you wouldn’t believe!”

Elaine and Leanne’s friendship rapidly deepened and expanded to scholarly mentorship. Leanne describes Elaine’s enduring impact, “she has wisdom and love and protectiveness over me...She made me who I am today!”

Thirty years ago, Elaine asked Leanne to write a review of her book. “For the first time I reflected on what my older foremothers had done...and my generation was like their academic daughters...That’s what really launched me as a scholar and a writer.” Recently, Elaine asked Leanne to write an article on a related topic. Leanne reflects on the significance of how time has passed, and the importance of women aging, “I was so happy because part of the article I’m writing is honoring her generation. I get to honor [Elaine].”

Leanne also cherishes her intergenerational friendship with “Joanne,” approximately 80 years old. Their friendship, too, was “instantaneous,” when Leanne invited Joanne and her husband, new academic transplants to Anchorage, to her home for dinner. Through her friendship with Joanne, Leanne receives guidance, reassurance, and candid feedback, which she values deeply. Joanne’s no-nonsense approach complements Elaine’s more circumspect, gentle suggestions, providing Leanne with diverse perspectives that encourage self-reflection and growth. “I might get a suggestion from Elaine, a serious one, or, you know, like a question, whereas Joanne will just flat out say, ‘what the hell?’...it’s always toward encouragement and toward things they see in me that I’m neglecting to honor myself.”

Of Elaine and Joanne, Leanne says, throughout life they have been “guiding me, you know, and reassuring me, because I haven’t chosen a conventional path. A lot of it was reassuring that I’m doing the right things.” Girlfriends give each other advice, she says, but “it has a different flavor when it’s somebody who has more years than you do, and more experience

than you do, and they're looking out for you...they [intergenerational friendships] are different than other kinds of friendships with peers. There's a different flavor to it, that comes from the [age] difference and feeling of being loved in a way that's a little different. It's about support and direction and making you, you know, pause and reflect for a minute."

In fact, Leanne pursues and maintains "meaningful friendships with younger generations as well," such as artists, and the children of friends she has watched grow, who are now entering their forties. Leanne says those relationships offer different benefits than her intergenerational friendships with older people, "but they feed each other. It makes me reflect on my relationships with my elders." She continues, "To watch people develop, that is the most interesting thing in the world to me, you know, to get to know who people are." She reflects that her intergenerational friendships with older women influence her desire to form those with younger generations, too, saying "it is a ripple...lots of circularity there." She concludes, "We need these intergenerational friendships."

Max's Friendship with Jayne and "The Sailing Crew"

"Max," age 40, lives in Chicago, IL and is a father of two daughters, a sailing enthusiast, a book club member, a tinkerer, and the son of Korean immigrants. Max has a small group of close, proximal friendships in Chicago, and also maintains looser friendships with many people across the United States with whom he connects seasonally or situationally. Across all these connections, Max says the friendship remains close, with the ability to dive back into intimate conversations as though no time has passed. A software engineer by trade, Max maintains a spreadsheet of his friendships, as he aspires to consistently reach out to friends and needed a tool to help him remember to do so.

Max's age-similar and intergenerational friends share common characteristics with each other, and with Max himself: They are authentic, mature, reliable, consistent, generous, and giving in time and skills. They are good listeners, empathetic, spontaneous, generally aligned in values and views on life and politics, and at a similar socioeconomic level. Max loves to tackle projects with his friends, from repairing playground equipment, to brewing beer, to baking bread, and he is always happy to hold a friend's baby.

From an early age, through his parent's church, Max was surrounded by deep and meaningful conversations with elders. He says he has "always been comfortable with folks who are older...and as the youngest child, I probably aspired to be older than I was." Since then, he has had a through line of friendship with people a generation or more older than himself, including a few teachers from his high school who later became friends, a professional development course instructor, his high school's now-retired alumni director, his longtime dentist, and a group of six older people with whom he crews a sailboat on Lake Michigan. Max reflects, "[My intergenerational friends] occupy an important role to me...I rely on them maybe in some ways that people would rely on their parents...a familial, aunt/uncle type of relationship."

Max's friendship with "Jayne," now in her early 80s, began through her role as his high school math teacher and eventual alumni director. "It was her job to reach out," but Max reciprocated, making sure to engage her in conversation, attend office hours, and help out with her alumni projects. Eventually their more formal structured connection expanded into a more voluntary, reciprocal friendship. Max attended Jayne's daughter's plays, and Jayne and her husband "Robert" hosted Max at their house for meals. Their conversations range widely, discussing good food, Cuban music, travel, politics and worldviews, experiences raising kids

(especially as Max entered that role), and their experiences with their second marriage. Robert taught Max and his former wife how to bake bread, now an expert skill of Max's. Jayne asked Max for his guidance and support as she retired and established a teacher alumni group. Max says that despite the significant age and life stage difference:

I never felt like it was a unidirectional relationship. She treated me like a person who was interesting to her. Robert treated me, like, not exactly a peer, but also not a kid. That was a really wonderful thing to be treated as a friend, as a fellow human being, by someone who is as experienced as them, and older. I also admired them because they liked dancing together...I was inspired by them and just thinking that they were really cool.

Max reflects that he remembers expressing to Jayne and Robert the benefits he felt from their friendship, "it is really nice to be able to talk to them about things that I haven't experienced yet, you know?...Life stages, marriage, divorce, having kids, having kids that are older, getting older, retirement."

Max also spends a significant amount of time each summer with six older friends in their seventies who are co-owners of a sailboat on Lake Michigan, for which he crews. Max is the youngest of the group and has sailed with this group for over ten years after being introduced by a mutual sailing acquaintance. Max says that the sailing crew are good listeners, from whom he gets advice and perspective. He says, "For example, I've asked them what has made their marriages successful, and specifically for one of them what it was like to get remarried." His sailing crew also asks him for his perspectives on racial justice, social media, and more. He says, "These kinds of conversations are enjoyable and fun and also are safe, in which people don't feel like they're going to sound irrelevant." On the boat, Max reflects, there's a physical and strategic give and take in the act of sailing, but also an intergenerational reciprocity. Max says that the

sailing crew has helped inspire him to pursue lifelong interests and recognize there is always something new to learn, concluding, “I treasure them for that.” The benefits Max finds from intergenerational friendships with older people inspire him to begin pursuing more intentional friendship with younger people, saying that now he “can think pretty naturally about a desire to have friends that are younger than me.”

Karis’ Friendship with Rosie

“Karis,” age 44, lives near St. Paul, MN with her husband, four children, and dog. She is of Germanic-British descent, a Christian, a Pastor, a Spanish teacher, and a friend who extends open arms and a place at her dinner table to neighbors and community members. Karis’ closest friends emerged from shared formative experiences including camp, college, ministry initiatives, or work with other teachers or pastors. Karis and her friends all share characteristics of loyalty, empathy, helpfulness, full presence, and the desire to ask thought-provoking questions and listen actively to the answers. She also loves laughing with her friends and offers her strong reflective skills that “help people discern when they’re at a crossroads or making a decision.”

Of intergenerational relationships, Karis says, “I have always liked looking up and down [in age],” what she describes as reciprocal giving to and receiving from older and younger people, but the intergenerational nature of friendship is not intentionally something she seeks out explicitly. She reflects, however, that establishing age-diverse friendship is a characteristic her parents share, too. Karis regularly engages with several people older and younger than her, including her neighbors “Mac” age 28, a good friend and former babysitter to her children, and her close friends “Rosie” age 80, and “Gail” age 64. Karis met Rosie in 2008 when Rose was a parishioner in the church where Karis was a Pastor. Gail was Karis’ colleague, mentor, and a fellow parent who shared advice from her additional years of experience parenting.

In the early years of their friendship, Rosie showed a deep, loving devotion to Karis' very young children, knitting them baby clothes, and spending time calmly and graciously amid "the family chaos." Rosie showed so much interest in and acceptance for their growing family that, Karis says, it became natural for her to join the family for ever more activities, including dinner, walks, reading books, scrapbooking, and celebrating holidays and birthdays. Karis admires and is profoundly touched by Rosie's love and nonjudgmental acceptance of herself and her approach to parenting. Rosie was supportive even in the hardest times during Karis' kids' growing pains and various successes and challenges. Karis says, "She was like an adoptive grandma, like extended family...and gradually she became my friend, too." Karis appreciates how many different threads and angles there are to their friendship and connection within the family.

Karis says Rosie drew her into friendship. "She's fun, she's caring, she's flexible and understanding...she's spunky." Rosie once surprised the family on Halloween in an elaborate costume and likes teasing Karis about a plastic houseplant. "I accidentally watered it for, like, a month," she laughs. The friends often sit and chat long after family meals, and Karis says, "I love being welcomed and received [by Rosie]." Karis says she thinks Rosie feels a similar way about their friendship: "I think she feels a sense of purpose, and a sense of contribution, acceptance, and that she matters."

As Rosie experiences health challenges, she and Karis talk about mortality and their age difference. Even though "the line gets blurry between just being a good friend and being somebody who used to be her pastor," Karis says, "it gives me a window into realities that older people face that I otherwise wouldn't know." Karis describes this perspective of acceptance and love as both personally enriching as a friend, parent, and person, and professionally enriching in her church ministry work.

Mentorship Plus

Virgo's Friendships with Leo and Carson

“Virgo,” age 32, lives in Connecticut, loves to investigate what makes things tick, figure out how things work, and complete puzzles. Now a software engineer for a large company, Virgo likes to watch movies, play video games, and spend time hanging out with his friends and family. A problem-solver since childhood, Virgo arrived in the United States from the Dominican Republic with his family at age 8 and helped his parents navigate the bureaucratic immigration and residency process, complete governmental paperwork, and learn English. When Virgo began making friends in college, his cheerful, extroverted demeanor, good listening skills, and willingness to help others and share advice, endeared him to a large network of age-similar friends, fraternity brothers, and acquaintances. Virgo’s friends and family often told him that he had “an old soul,” an inclination born from Virgo’s sense that “some of my thinking is a bit more mature than thinking of people my age.”

After completing college and graduate studies, Virgo entered computer engineering, where he began to meet people outside of his age and life stage. He gradually realized that some of his previous friendships were no longer serving him, as some friends seemed to judge his new perspectives or changing opinions as he grew and took advantage of his willingness to help. Virgo found that, as he aged, his inner circle of friends got smaller, comprised of hard-working, outspoken friends who were willing to talk with Virgo about any subject with honesty and without judgment. His enduring friendships are with those who were open to changing their minds and accepting Virgo’s growth and changing perspectives.

A decade ago, as an early-career intern in a large, established, public company, Virgo connected with two mid and late-career colleagues. “Leo”, age 70, and “Carson”, age 56, acted

as early workplace mentors to Virgo. Leo and Carson, already friends with one another, gently helped Virgo expand his technical engineering skills as well as navigate the culture, politics, and interpersonal dynamics of the workplace. Over time, their connection extended beyond those clear lines of mentorship. Virgo says, “The moments kind of added up, where you feel like you can be more and more yourself in front of that person...and oh cool, he didn’t run away.” Virgo noticed that Leo and Carson continued to welcome him into their workplace friendship, receiving his increasing authenticity well, inviting him to lunch on workdays, and then, eventually, to dinners. Now, the three friends have dinner together every month, despite Leo’s retirement five years ago.

Virgo says that the friendship “transcended” the traditional mentorship relationship, sharing about Leo:

He encouraged me to follow this path...and gave me the confidence boost that I needed. He never treated me like I was unintelligent. He would support my growth in learning things. He would try to kind of correct, in a nudging way, on how to do certain things and not just with technology or my job, but like the interpersonal stuff, too...even though there is a 37-year difference, Leo is very much like an equal.

Virgo says that he and Carson also started out in a mentee/mentor relationship, which has also changed significantly over time. Carson trusts Virgo’s technical expertise so much now that “he runs things through me when we’re trying to make decisions on technology...so that’s something I bring to my relationship with Carson, an understanding of the current technology better.” Carson explicitly asks for Virgo’s perspective on current events and news, sharing that they have a more equal relationship now.

Describing his friendship with Leo and Carson, Virgo says that the maturity that comes with age, shines through in how Leo and Carson “accept [me] as [I] accept them,” and he feels their age-earned wisdom means that they do not try to change him:

This is something that I’ve learned also with having older friendships, it’s the knowing how to speak to someone, dealing with the confrontation or an internal conflict because of what they said...and being able to have the power to kind of talk to someone right...The older friends in my life have allowed me to kind of, like, test the waters of communication, learn how to vocalize myself, and read social cues.

Virgo believes that his older friends benefit from seeing a member of Gen Z break the stereotypes that they otherwise held about the generation. He shows them that the values they care about, “old American values of empathy, compassion, being good to your fellow man and neighbor,” are still alive and well, despite the stereotypes that the media portrays about Gen Z. Virgo describes how Leo and Carson were surprised by how many questions he asked early in his internship, how curious and eager to learn he was, how willing he was to work hard. He believes he also offers Leo and Carson, two white men, the important perspective of a person of color.

Sometimes, generational references highlight the age difference between Virgo and his friends, as well as the social and cultural differences (Leo and Carson are white and American-born and Virgo identifies as a person of color and was born outside the U.S.). They laugh at these instances, joking tenderly with one another about being older or younger. However, Virgo notices that Leo is going to more funerals than the weddings that populate Virgo’s calendar, saying, “It puts it into perspective, the natural process of life.” He continues, “I know it’s very cliché, but I see now how age is just a natural thing...it’s how you choose to act. You don’t have

to act like a typical TV old person. You can still be yourself and surround yourself with good people.”

Rae’s Friendship with Susanna

“Rae,” 40, a white woman in Palatine, Illinois, with a Catholic upbringing, spends much of her time with her family, including her husband, two elementary-aged children, and her nearby parents. While Rae’s social intelligence, energy, and curiosity spark acquaintanceships with many people, such as with an age-diverse group of fellow horseback riders at her local barn, she invests her social time and effort in a small group of close, long-term female friendships. Rae’s deep friendships are a result of her nonjudgmental listening ear, her spirit of reciprocity, her excitement about her friend’s successes and support with their adversities, and interest in checking in regularly with her loved ones.

Rae’s closest intergenerational friendships began in the workplace—at two law school career counseling offices in Chicago—and evolved from an early workplace mentorship connection into close friendship despite no longer working with her older friends, including “Susanna,” approximately age 60. When Rae was hired at Susanna’s workplace, she immediately sought out Susanna because of her great reputation. Within a year, Rae says, “We became friends at work, and I think she’s fabulous and funny and insightful, a really good support. I trust her with confidential information.” Rae says that she benefits from Susanna’s “ability to impart a lot of wisdom about the industry that we share, about general workplace dynamics, recommendations and strategies for navigating the workplace.” Rae also benefits from Susanna’s vast professional network, and says Susanna is willing to leverage her network for Rae. Susanna showed her how to do this well, and now it is an action Rae likes to do for her emerging younger work friends.

Eight years into their friendship, Rae comments:

She's at a different stage in life than me, but we can both give each other advice on things...despite our age, we're going through similar things, scenarios in the workplace or in parenting, so I can offer my perspective...we kind of share resources about different things in life even though she's 20 years older than me. But because of her age, she's able to impart wisdom, recommendations and strategies that have worked for her in terms of navigating the workplace especially because we're in the same industry, general workplace dynamics...also all her connections and a little bit about navigating parenting too because she's older and in a different parenting stage. There's absolutely benefits in terms of the advice that she can give.

In conversations, Rae and Susanna occasionally remark on their age gap, always without judgment, just noticing generation-specific references or life stage difference. "Generalizations can be made about different generations, right? But in this case, [Susanna's] an early adopter of new technology and pop culture. It's not anything stereotypical." Rae says, "Regardless of age, it's wonderful to have [Susanna] in my life," because she can divulge her own stories, and hear Susanna's experiences, within a place of trust and confidentiality, and feel a sense of authentic connection where she can be her "real, true self, and say my feelings even if they're difficult."

Rae says that her friendship with Susanna opens her eyes and interest in developing more intergenerational friendship with older women who are also mothers and can "impart wisdom from the future, related to parenting for example. For changes that happen as you age, as a woman, like going through menopause...you can't get that from a peer-to-peer friendship at your same age." And, it has also sparked Rae's interest in befriending coworkers who are ~15-20 years younger than her, too, which she views as a great window into what the younger generation

is thinking and seeing as important. Rae is eager to learn from them and also give them “the perspective I can offer, more years in the industry, more connections and advice, and also, I think...I try to be a steady positive to them or offer little counters for what I see is like, have some self-compassion for yourself.”

Niche Enthusiasm

Ameya’s Friendship with Matthew

“Ameya,” age 38, is a drummer, an airplane enthusiast, a tennis player, a father, husband, a self-described Luddite and old soul, and a friend to “Matthew,” age 60. Ameya grew up within his tight-knit Indian-American community in Texas. Ameya’s early childhood friendships arose from this proximal community, and his adolescent and early adult friendships followed suit with peers of his same age who attended the same school at the same time. Ameya’s intergenerational friendship with Matthew started out differently, separately from his core community, and has remained in a special “bubble” ever since.

At age 12, Ameya noticed an older white man in his 30s flying a radio controlled (RC) model airplane in the nearby parks. Fascinated by airplanes and the recent recipient of his own RC airplane kit, Ameya approached Matthew to talk shop. To safely build RC airplanes, “you need someone to teach you these things,” Ameya emphasizes. Over the course of a few conversations, Matthew shared tips for Ameya as he built his airplane, saying, “He helped me through some stuff, like, he would give me some advice, and I’d go home and break something, and come back.” Ultimately, Matthew invited Ameya to bring his RC airplane to the park where he helped Ameya get his airplane up and running, teaching him moves. From then on, the two spent hours flying their planes together, over long evenings and weekends. “Then, eventually, like, we just realized that we were friends, like I’d then go over to his house...to typically work

on airplanes until like 11 at night. ...he kind of became my hobby mentor.” Their friendship continued as Ameya grew into adolescence and early adulthood, sharing Ameya’s first beer together. “One of my most memorable experiences, we went to his flying field, and we both had the same plane, and like we ended up doing like dog fighting-like maneuvers...there’s 20-30 people there with their planes and they just stopped doing what they were doing just to watch us.”

Their age gap was not the only difference between the two: Ameya, a “nerdy Indian kid,” and Matthew, a “big dude who smokes Marlborough Reds all day,” collects motorcycles, and drives around in a truck. “We are very different people, and so it was just a funny juxtaposition,” Ameya reflects. Although no one remarked on their age difference, Ameya was very aware of the various differences between him and Matthew. “Nobody else had that...nobody had an intergenerational thing like this. So I felt odd, I mean, I was actually proud of it...It did feel weird...like it wasn’t a very common thing.”

Ameya and Matthew’s friendship has endured for 24 years. When reflecting on the benefits of their friendship, Ameya says:

The friendship kind of evolved over time...we don’t have a lot in common, you know, except [the airplanes]. But this is strong enough to, like, be all that we really needed to like bond over all these years. [At first I was] getting perspective from someone who had radically different views and lifestyle from anyone I knew at the time...I think I learned a lot from the intergenerational aspect. In terms of mentorship, you know, he clearly knew a lot about the subject, and was very readily able to provide that mentorship. It kinda felt like my older brother, you know, he would take care of me...There were a couple of times where, like, I was feeling really bummed about what I was building, or my plane

just crashed, and he, like, stayed up all night and helped me rebuild it...and he offered to you know, buy me another one, when he had like no money....but he kind of was overseeing my general well-being...I don't think my peers would do this.

Yet the friendship stayed in its certain separate space, outside of Ameya's day-to-day community. Although he was invited, Matthew did not attend Ameya's high school graduation or wedding, and his family and other friends have only met Matthew a handful of times. Ameya reflected that in some ways he wanted their lives to integrate more, but the fact that it is separate from their other social connections "makes it a bit more special...it's a really anomalous but amazing relationship."

What benefits does Ameya think Matthew gains from their intergenerational friendship? To start, Ameya later recognized that Matthew was going through some difficult marital problems at the time they met and became friends. Ameya thinks that Matthew appreciated the generational difference between them because it allowed Matthew to:

Act as a mentor and escape a little bit from life's cruel problems...he loved teaching me about his culture. I think I did provide that buffer, and maybe I gave him confidence cause I feel like there was not a lot of stuff going well in his life...but like with me, he was like this amazing RC pilot...and he was able to maybe have more confidence and find more of himself, and find that confidence through his hanging out with me and teaching me and saying, Hey, this kid is actually like somewhat looking up to me, like that's really cool.

Ameya and Matthew don't necessarily talk about their age difference, but they do talk about their friendship with pride. Even though Ameya and Matthew live in different states now, they still connect over the phone a few times of year, always talking about their new endeavors,

such as Matthew's motorcycles or Ameya's daughter. Ameya shares that he loves the different and longer life perspective he gains from his relationship with Matthew, saying We didn't need to [have similar life perspective]. We had a common interest and the common interest was very deep and powerful." He continues, "We are very dismissive of people who are not of our generation...we're just prone to wanting to stay in our peer group...but in this case there's so much to gain from getting outside of that comfort zone; you shed this pretense of knowing everything, and once you shed that, you realize you have a lot to learn. "There's a lot of perspective, a lot of knowledge sharing, there's mentorship."

Siya's Intergenerational Friendship Network

"Siya," 39, is a multi-hyphenate entrepreneur, author, speaker, podcaster, and creative who has a full and fulfilling work and social life in her home in the Philippines. In addition to her busy entrepreneurial endeavors and attendance at Sunday Mass, Siya loves dancing, singing, traveling, and is very close to her family in the Philippines. Siya's childhood was heavily influenced by the close connection she and her mother shared before her mother passed: Siya and her mother would tell one another stories for hours every day after Siya's school day, which ultimately inspired Siya to become an author.

Siya approaches life with zest and a sense of playful spontaneity. She has worked hard to love and accept herself, and is not afraid to fail because, "I see that as a learning opportunity." She has an active social life with an inner circle of close friends and an extended group of good friends that she engages with for specific purposes. For example, she has a friend with whom she discusses intellectual interests, a friend who can discuss the bigger challenges and insecurities, other friends who are open to spontaneous adventures, and friends who are connected to her career.

Siya “treasures” her intergenerational friendships, estimating she has between 5-10 good intergenerational friends both older and younger than her. She primarily meets them through her entrepreneurial work, including her close friend “Ani,” age 60, and she regularly becomes friends with her peers’ moms, including her close friend “Francy,” age 75. Siya shares that although the Filipino culture puts a high priority on multi-generational living and community support, it is not common for her peer-age friends to have intergenerational friends, and this makes her a bit different from her peers, sharing, “I’m more inclined toward the people older than me.”

Siya first met Ani at a conference, and they connected about their shared interest in speaking and writing. They went to dinner and clicked immediately. Ani invited Siya to co-facilitate a seminar shortly thereafter. Siya says, “We’re both brave, fearless, and we both have crazy ideas and act on them...The child in me recognizes the child in her and vice versa. I don’t even see her as someone older than me.” Their friendship is grounded in deep, mutual respect and a sense that both benefit from it.

Ani’s friendship with Siya extends to their shared love for singing, dancing, watching movies, and travel, such that they barely talk about work anymore, and just talk about their personal interests. When Ani visits the Philippines from her home in Canada the two meet up, plan travel together, and create impromptu TikTok videos. Siya shares, “[Ani] says, ‘let’s dance, and I don’t care if others are watching.’ I cannot do this with my other friends.”

When reflecting on the benefits of their relationship, Siya says she sees Ani’s type of playful and creative aging as inspiring. Furthermore, Siya says that watching Ani and her husband engage, “I get inspired of the kind of future I want to have, when I get married...so by her example, by observing how [they interact, I get] a glimpse of the kind of future I want.” Siya

continues, sharing that Ani's life story is one of resilience, saying "she's been through a lot, and she was able to overcome everything with grace, with a smile. Through her examples and through her stories I could see that it is possible for someone to succeed, even with lots of limitation." Ani has told Siya that she, too, is inspired by how Siya lives her life, her active creative pursuits, her bravery, and how she makes big goals happen, such as making a professionally-produced YouTube music video of the two of them singing and dancing together.

Siya has numerous other older friends who serve in motherly roles alongside their shared interests. For example, Siya met Francy through their shared interest in public speaking at a Toastmasters Club meeting, although Siya is also an age-similar friend of Francy's daughter. Siya and Francy discovered they were both taking singing lessons, holding it as "our little secret," because neither wanted others to know they were practicing despite their tone-deafness. Siya recently attended Francy's 75th birthday party, cherishing how good the home-cooking was. "Another [friend] is the mom of another friend of mine, so I told my friend that I miss a mom's cooking, and so she created opportunities for me and her mom to meet...and also for her to hug her mom...and then I became friends with her mom, too." She reflects that she loves the meaningful meals shared with her friends and their moms, who are also now her friends. She is friends with "Sara," age 60+, who knew her mom before she passed. Sara is very funny, cheerful, cool, and offered to be her mentor and godmother for her eventual marriage, sending Sara food for her birthday (and Siya sends flowers in return): "It's like she wants to look after me, something like that...there's that respect that she's older than me, but she's also young at heart, very young at heart...but she is like the motherly figure."

Perspective and Personal Navigation

Nora's Friendship with Bill

“Nora,” age 44, is a white woman living in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina and is a Mom to an adult daughter. Nora is in a long-term relationship and works full time in Human Resources at a nonprofit research firm. A curious, compassionate, and attentive person, Nora loves spending time outdoors, being active, traveling, and learning about other cultures and other people’s stories. Her friendships are an important, valuable part of her life, and she describes having close, deep, meaningful friendships with a small group of friends with whom she can spend intentional, in-person, one-on-one time with, adding, “there’s definitely a pattern [of intergenerational friendship].”

Nora met “Bill,” age 76, when she moved to Raleigh. After meeting randomly, Bill invited Nora to join his bike club, “the biking buddies” and after many long bike rides, they would sit on their porch and talk at length. Bill is openhearted, welcomes everyone in, and made Nora feel welcome in his life and with his family from Day One. As someone who deeply desires a sense of connection and feeling like she matters, Nora says, “The authenticity and truth with how he does it is special...He just kept saying to me, ‘come on in, I got you.’”

Bill and Nora share a task-oriented, active nature, and Bill was eager to teach Nora how to crew a sailboat. She says, “He invested in me on the boat, taught me the skills, he took all this time and invested quality time with me...he was always inviting me to go fly fishing with him.” Sharing this quality time together over the years solidified their friendship.

Their intergenerational friendship was not only fun, active, outdoor tasks. Bill and his wife lost their beloved son Shayne in his mid-40s. A friend to Nora and many in the community, Shayne’s early, tragic death, devastated many. Nora shares, “Shayne shared so many of Bill’s

traits of openness, optimism, and positivity, like this [she extends her arms wide open]...they really had a multigenerational family that all shared these amazing, loving traits.” When Shayne was sick, Bill often asked Nora to go for a walk. They would walk on a trail together, and she would just listen, and just show up. She reflects, “He chose to call me...I imagine he felt really heard, seen, and not judged by me. He could show up however he was. He knew there was a lot of trust, he knew I would drop everything and show up in love.”

Nora was deeply moved by how she saw Bill, his wife, and Shayne navigate Shayne’s illness and death. She reflects that instead of folding into their nuclear family, they continued to welcome her and others into their home, their hope, their sadness, and their real lives. Nora sees how Bill navigated this tragic time as an inspiring model for how to live a full life, with arms wide open. She also believes that some of her deep love for Bill’s friendship—and her other intergenerational friends, of which there are many, both male and female—is because “I’m not super close with my family. I wouldn’t say [Bill] is like a father figure...but there’s a part of me that really appreciates that he like, put his arm around my shoulder, and loves and cares for me. It fills a part of my life that is a missing piece.” Nora reflects that she thinks her intergenerational friendships offer her this familial feeling, but also the ability to view “wisdom of navigating adverse circumstances...I’ve learned from Bill how I would like to show up in the world.”

Margaret’s Friendship with June

“Margaret,” age 39, is a white woman who lives in Chicago with her spouse and two children, ages 8 and 4. A professional fundraiser for a higher education institution, Margaret spends time with her family, enjoys moving her body outdoors, and maintains friendships and connections through her book club and regular church attendance. Growing up in Minneapolis, Margaret observed her parents’ strong and positive friendships with their age-peers and spent

much time with family friends. One friend of her parents has since also become Margaret's friend, independent of her parents' friendship, demonstrating Margaret's openness to intergenerational friendship from an early age.

Friendship feeds Margaret and helps her feel emotionally balanced; she finds that from her lifelong friends as well as newer friends she is meeting, primarily those who parent children her own kids' ages. She is drawn to friends who "are seeking some sort of meaning-making in life, and who are interested in the common good in their community," which is also true of Margaret. Margaret is a forgiving, gracious friend, attentive to her friends' interests and current events, curious to keep up with them, and loyal to the friendship for the long term. Margaret has about five close friends who are at least 20 years older than she is, whom she met through work, yoga class, and church. She reflects that in her twenties, her intergenerational friendships were more present and stronger in her life, but since having children the makeup of her friendship pool shifted, toward friends who are in a more similar stage of life, primarily parenting young kids.

Despite Margaret's recent shift toward life-stage-similar friends, her close friendship with "June," who is in her early 70s, has endured for nearly 15 years. Margaret met June at her first job post-college, working at a local community-based nonprofit organization. June was nearing the end of her career. Margaret shares, "She kind of adopted me. She's very much into mentorship, it's something she enjoys providing and doing." For example, Margaret recalls June's helpful suggestions for navigating workplace transitions and workplace interpersonal dynamics, telling Margaret that it would be ok if she took another job outside the nonprofit, but to be discerning about who she told about her departure and when. Margaret says, "[June] gave me permission to like, make my own decision, and have some freedom in that...and be like, life will go on for me and for them. I've since shared that with other people."

As their work relationship and mentorship evolved, June invited Margaret to meals at her house and for the Jewish holidays, and Margaret became friends with June's adult son. About ten years ago, June moved to Portland, OR, and their friendship continues primarily via email, text, and extensive notecard and letter writing (especially from June to Margaret), though when June visits Chicago they always make time for a meal, which gives them hours to talk.

They discuss a range of topics, moving beyond workplace mentorship now that they no longer work together. "[June] is a direct person and she doesn't hold back in sharing her opinions...She talks about her kids who are my age or a little older than me, about parenting her kids, and what she's working through in her life." Margaret says that she benefits from June's older age in these ways:

There is wisdom, from life experience, that a friend who's significantly older can bring...and in the mutuality of a friendship like that, there's also a helpful reminder to me that, like, you're not always going to be in the stage of life you are in right now. Because of [June], I get to hear from a friend about parenting adult children... There's a real benefit of perspective that comes from friends who are not in the exact same life stage.

Margaret says she thinks that June will be a great friend with whom she can discuss body changes, such as menopause, observing that, "I might feel more comfortable asking [June] than my own mom." Margaret also says talking with June about menopause and other topics regarding aging helps her better understand her own parents, who are the same ages as June. Margaret suspects June benefits from their friendship just as much, sharing, "I think she feels like having a younger friend is kind of refreshing...but I think she is also processing through our friendship things that happened when she was my age." It gives June a chance, Margaret says, to make more meaning out of her experiences, and to share her wisdom with Margaret.

Margaret thinks the benefits of her intergenerational friendships go beyond simply hearing advice and wisdom, but observing that her older friends have made it through many of the challenges that Margaret faces at this life stage. For example, when Margaret experienced challenges breastfeeding her newborn, she asked an older friend how long that similar issue had taken to resolve. The friend couldn't remember. Margaret was shocked, thinking to herself:

How can you forget something *like this?! But then they left and I was like, huh, they don't remember. Someday when I'm 65, I won't remember. It's not permanent. Yeah, these challenges aren't permanent, and like, that's so encouraging that it's a passing thing...It's wisdom they didn't know they were passing along just by their own experience.*

After a moment of reflection, Margaret shares enthusiastically, "Someday I will have a friend in their early twenties. Good!"

Charles' Friendship with Mary

"Charles," age 69, is an entertaining, engaged, attentive, and loyal friend who makes strong connections wherever he goes. A semi-retired doting uncle and caring brother, Charles lives in Washington, D.C., is white, and is grieving the recent death of his husband, "Martin." Growing up in Minneapolis, Charles' earliest friendships were with his grandmother, the household staff she employed, and the older kids in the neighborhood. Charles' inclination toward community engagement started as a teenager through his dance classes and volunteer work at the community health clinic, and has continued ever since, through lifelong arts curation and patronage, auditing graduate-level courses at the local university, volunteer work, and even at the dog park (full disclosure: Charles and I, age 39, are friends, and so are our dogs! I am not, however, the only friend that Charles has charmed at the dog park.). He reflects that this type of

“community related” involvement regularly puts him in contact with people of different ages. “I was always drawn to elders,” he says.

Charles describes himself as an extrovert who has very intimate and close intergenerational friendships with “Mary,” “Nancy & Dick,” all in their 90s, and me, age 39. In the face of grief, Charles is slowly and intentionally opening up to social connection beyond his family and closest circle of friends. He is reconnecting with friends he had lost touch with decades prior, pleased that “we come right back together easily.” Generally, Charles seeks out acquaintance with others whom he feels “fondly towards,” and the friendship continues with those who are “able to connect on a deeper level” and those who are “interested and able to talk about their passions.” He finds connections with friends who are interested in disparate topics such as shipping containers, anti-corruption efforts in the Ukraine, or economic development in Kenya. “I’ve always sought out unique and diverse perspectives,” Charles says, “as well as people who are introspective.”

In his adolescence, Charles befriended his future husband, Martin, through a community clinic where they both served as youth board members. There, Charles and Martin met the Executive Director, Mary, over 20 years their senior and now in her 90s. Mary recognized the importance of Charles and Martin’s constituent voices and perspectives and showed them great respect and care. Mary began to unofficially mentor Charles and Martin in their educational and career pursuits, supporting Charles in his eventual successful career leading and consulting for disability health care organizations: “She helped me start the local chapter of our Traumatic Brain Injury [group]; she mentored me and offered guidance about policies and strategic planning.” Beyond the career guidance, “[Mary] helped me process what was going on in life,” offering “personal wisdom and personal navigation” over the years. She taught Charles how to

cook, showing him how to use spices and improve a notably bad lasagna, and she taught him cognitive tools for managing anxiety and unhelpful thoughts. They joked and laughed often and lovingly, about their age and life stage differences.

Yet, Charles emphasizes, “There were bi-directional benefits to our friendship, not only one-direction benefits like normal mentorship.” He explains that Mary, a mother of young children at the time, was in the midst of a divorce during the early years of their friendship. She appreciated that Charles and Martin provided kindness and care during that time, as they too were navigating family challenges and could all offer and give social support. “Mary liked our energy, our emotional intimacy, we were good listeners... We helped raise their kids after her divorce. Martin took [Mary’s daughter] to horseback riding lessons.” Charles believes that Mary felt “parent-adjacent,” as though she had helped to raise Charles and Martin as gay men navigating societal barriers, and she felt “rewarded by seeing us come alive and become successful.” Charles’ deep and abiding friendship with Mary continues to this day, despite Charles’ and Martin’s subsequent moves to Provincetown, MA and Washington, D.C.

Both Sides Now: The Ripple Effects of Intergenerational Friendship

My Friendship with Charles

It turns out, without ever meeting Mary, I also benefitted from the cognitive tools and cooking skills shared with Charles—I see these as ripple advantages of intergenerational friendship. I am a 39-year-old, white, nonprofit worker in Northern Virginia, and in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, Charles and I talked regularly on the phone. He taught me the way that Mary taught him to compartmentalize mental chatter: envision a box, wrap up anxious or ruminating thoughts in the box, and visualize yourself putting the box on the shelf. It helped me immensely. Charles also taught me how to cook pizza at home, using a plethora of delicious

spices. We attend frequent dance performances together and talk about current and historic events, provide social support to one another through challenges including grief and anxiety, and celebrate the good experiences and successes we each have. He encourages me to dream up and pursue audacious goals: Charles championed my decision to apply for graduate school and eagerly asked about my learning throughout. We love and care for each other's dogs.

I benefit, too, from Charles' willingness to engage in emotionally vulnerable conversations, with his wisdom and perspective gathered from his own experiences. He accepts and loves me fully as I am now, and as I grow and change. He fully encourages my big goals of homeownership, graduate school, and travel without questioning the big risks. Charles helps me prepare for adversity by sharing his stories of navigating cancer treatment and many losses of loved ones – by showing me how to do both with full emotional honesty and hope. Charles' grounded yet persistent optimism and resilience is an inspiring model for me to live authentically, with an orientation toward engagement, curiosity, connection, and hope.

As Charles described his friendship with Mary, Charles and my intergenerational friendship, too, is bi-directionally advantageous. Charles says he benefits from "richness of perspective" that he gleans from our generational and nearly 30-year age difference. (I do, too). He said he feels pride in my accomplishments, just as Mary did his. Furthermore, Charles feels that friendship with younger generations like me, "helps me fulfill my purpose at this stage." Elaborating further, Charles describes that he likes sharing what he has learned about navigating adversities such as physical and mental illness, challenging career transitions, and death to "help prepare you." And, Charles says, he receives "love and respect from our intergenerational friendship." I do, too.

Summary of Findings

These ten interviews on intergenerational friendship revealed several notable benefits experienced by the younger generation within the friendship dyad and a few common characteristics therein. A short discussion of these findings explores the most common themes and patterns discovered through this study. Interviewees are referred to as “study participants” or “participants” throughout.

All participants reported feeling *genuinely, authentically accepted* and welcomed into the relationship for who they were from the moment of their first meeting, and over the years as they changed. This sense of acceptance is profoundly comforting and meaningful to the participants, cultivating a sense of belonging and bonding in the friendship. Often, the older friend created an inclusive container for the friendship, where the younger individuals felt valued and embraced without judgment, where their lack of work experience or perspective born from more years of life was not held against them. Furthermore, participants reported that, while they felt completely accepted for who they were, their older friends often encouraged them in growth without judgment. Participants felt supported and nurtured in this psychologically safe friendship structure.

Almost every subject highlighted the workplace mentorship they received from their older friends. For many this was the place they initially met their older friend, and where their older friend took them under their wing, sharing valuable workplace navigation insights, career advancement suggestions, technical skills, interpersonal workplace guidance, industry and professional network access, and more. Yet for all these workplace-germinated intergenerational friendships, there also came a point—usually about a year in—when the mentorship role tipped toward friendship, what I call here *mentorship plus*. None of these intergenerational connections

remained traditional mentor/mentee relationships, but rather as the younger friend gained more workplace knowledge and experience, they also began to share their knowledge, sometimes about the workplace itself, about technology, social movements, or other current topics.

Mentorship plus moved the budding friendship into reciprocal territory whereby the older and younger halves of the friendship were both able to give and receive. Many of the participants who alluded to this concept of mentorship-turned-friendship, mentioned how endearing it felt to know their older friend was excited by their professional growth.

Aligned with the framework of homophily in being-and-doing, a third common benefit from intergenerational friendship is *niche enthusiasm* for a very specific interest or hobby. Participants talked about learning the ropes, literally, on a sailboat, remote controlled airplanes, producing music videos, biking club activities, and dog parks. Occasionally participants mentioned that the playfulness or anomalous nature of this shared interest felt especially appealing with their older friends, more so than it would have with their peers. While not unique to intergenerational friendship, it appears that intergenerational friendship provided a platform for exploration and cultivation of these shared passions. Friends discovered a mutual enthusiasm for specific hobbies, activities, and areas of expertise, creating opportunities for joint engagement and shared experiences; two participants mentioned that they would otherwise not feel comfortable doing these activities with their peer-age friends. Further research may explore what and why intergenerational friendships may open the door to playfulness that the individuals within may not otherwise be willing to express.

All participants also mentioned benefiting from the *perspective and personal navigation* support shared by their older friend. Participants used the words wisdom, inspiration, resilient, role model to denote the benefits they gained. A few found inspiration in watching their older

friends embrace life fully, pursue big goals, or love with open arms despite previous adversity. For many younger friends, simply having an older friend who had more life experience, with, for example, marriage, parenting, career changes, interpersonal navigation, physical or mental health challenges, grief, and more, was deeply meaningful and helpful. Some older friends actively vocalized their perspectives, opinions, and lessons learned, while others more quietly let their actions speak. In both cases, through regular discussions with their older friends, younger friends gained access to broader ranges of experiences and views on navigating it. This exposure to different viewpoints occasionally challenged the participants' own beliefs and assumptions, fostering personal growth and development.

Intergenerational friendship with older friends seems to provide these four benefits to most of the ten younger friends who shared their stories. A few additional themes emerged, with less emphasis either within the individual interview stories, or across the ten participants. Many participants shared that they felt a *sense of pride in the relationship* being unique, especially if they had peers who were not in similar intergenerational friendship, and this pride in part stemmed from the deep love and value both participants felt in it. Nearly every subject mentioned that they had *always been drawn to older people*, or felt inclined to spend time with older generations, or that they felt or were told they were an "old soul." However, definitions of "old soul" differ among the participants, from valuing deep, high quality connections, caring about esoteric or "traditional" interests, to moving more intentionally through time and space. Most participants also used *kin-like language*, using words or phrases like aunt/uncle, parent-like or parental figure, sibling, like a grandparent, adopted, motherly, foremother, etc. Such as the LGBTQ+ community using descriptors like "chosen family" to describe the inclusive, loving, nonjudgmental friendships surrounding them, ascribing kin-adjacent language demonstrates just

how meaningful some of these intergenerational friendships can be. And, finally, intergenerational friendship with older people may set off ripple effects for middle-aged adults. No matter our age, as we benefit from friendship with people older than us, we may become more inclined to “pay it forward” and seek intergenerational friendship with younger generations as we, too, age.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations of this introductory exploration of intergenerational friendship start with the small, non-generalizable study sample size: I interviewed just ten people, each of whom self-identified and self-selected as having meaningful, positive intergenerational friendships they wanted to discuss. Others who did not choose to participate may have had neutral or negative experiences in friendship, or believe their intergenerational friendships offer no different benefits than their age-similar friendships. Future research can expand the study subject pool, including those who choose not to or have neutral perspectives on intergenerational friendship.

Beyond their similar interest in intergenerational friendship, the interview participants in this study skewed white (five of the ten), female (six of ten), within a similar age range (eight of ten were in their 30s and 40s), heterosexual (nine of ten), and highly educated with at least a master’s degree (eight of ten). While there are advantages in research conducted with a heterogeneous group of study participants (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017), these confounding factors affect how people engage in and view their friendships. For example, I am very curious about the rise of artificial intelligence, and how generations raised with social media engage and pursue intergenerational friendship as they age into middle adulthood. The influence of the varied experiences, broader racial and ethnic demographics, familial upbringing (including birth order) and current family structure and family life stage, perspectives from across the gender and

sexuality spectrum, religious communities, cultural norms, values, expectations—including generational, of course—all remain unexplored in this paper and thus present an opportunity for future research.

I, too, am not immune from prevailing societal norms and the resulting, unconscious bias that influences and poses limitations to research. One way to reduce such bias is recognizing that it exists and where it might come from: mine is due in part to my identity as a 39-year-old, highly educated, mid-career, able-bodied, heterosexual, married, White, American, liberal woman. Additional potential limitations of my own making include the possibility that I missed key pieces of the literature on intergenerational friendship. I regret if this is the case and encourage future researchers to expand their work to include those key references. Because there is limited research on intergenerational friendship currently, the door is open for exploration.

In Conclusion, an Invitation

When Chris Peterson, one of the founders of the field of positive psychology said, “Other People Matter” (2006, p.249), I like to think the subtext was *...especially those who are different from you*. We have so much to gain from being in positive relationships with others. Indeed, our well-being depends on it. We stand to gain particularly unique well-being advantages by engaging in intergenerational friendships. From feeling deeply accepted now and in the future, mentored in professional development and beyond, encouraged to play and engage in niche hobbies, and seeing the apertures of our lives widen through new perspectives and personal navigation tools, intergenerational friendship with older friends can serve all of us well. I invite you to seek them out, deepen the ones you have, and celebrate the beauty of investing in Both Sides Now (Mitchell, 1969).

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Appendix A

Lyrics to the Joni Mitchell song "Both Sides Now"¹

Rows and floes of angel hair
 And ice cream castles in the air
 And feather canyons everywhere
 I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun
 They rain and snow on everyone
 So many things I would have done
 But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
 From up and down, and still somehow
 It's cloud illusions I recall
 I really don't know clouds at all

Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels
 The dizzy dancing way you feel
 As every fairy tale comes real
 I've looked at love that way

But now it's just another show
 You leave 'em laughing when you go
 And if you care, don't let them know
 Don't give yourself away

I've looked at love from both sides now
 From give and take, and still somehow
 It's love's illusions I recall
 I really don't know love
 I really don't know love at all

Tears and fears and feeling proud
 To say, "I love you" right out loud
 Dreams and schemes and circus crowds
 I've looked at life that way

But now old friends are acting strange
 They shake their heads, they say I've
 changed
 Well something's lost, but something's
 gained
 In living every day

I've looked at life from both sides now
 From win and lose and still somehow
 It's life's illusions I recall
 I really don't know life at all

I've looked at life from both sides now
 From win and lose and still somehow
 It's life's illusions I recall
 I really don't know life at all

¹ Reprinted from *Both Sides Now*. Joni Mitchell. (June 19, 1967). Retrieved June 23, 2023 from <https://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=83>. Copyright Gandalf Publishing Co.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Dear Potential Interview Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you should only participate if you completely understand what the study requires and what the risks of participation are. You should ask the study team any questions you have related to participating before agreeing to join the study. If you have any questions about your rights as a human research participant at any time before, during or after participation, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (215) 898-2614 for assistance.

The research study is being conducted to help researchers at the University of Pennsylvania learn more about the dynamics of intergenerational friendship. You are eligible to participate in this study as you self-identified as someone with a friend more than 20 years younger or older than you. Your involvement in this study and the insights you provide will help to contribute to the body of knowledge about friendship.

If you agree to join the study, you will be asked to complete an interview. In the interview, you will be asked to provide your perspective on a variety of questions related to your friendship(s) with people more than 20 years older or younger than you, including how you met, how you engage in the friendship, and the benefits you derive from the intergenerational friendship(s).

Your participation will last for approximately 75 minutes, including 1 hour of an interview and 15 mins of review of the study and this consent form. Approximately 8-15 individuals will be interviewed as part of this small study. No follow up is expected after this interview. The researcher will send you the final capstone paper submission that your interview will inform.

If you decide to be in this interview, it will help us learn more about intergenerational friendship. You may also benefit from positive emotions generated when discussing the benefits of your friendships.

The most common risks of participation may be fatigue, boredom, and, while highly unlikely, breach of confidentiality. You will not be asked any questions of a sensitive nature. You are free to decline or stop participation at any time during or after the initial consenting process.

Why am I being asked to volunteer?

You are being asked to take part in a research study because you self-identified as someone who is in an intergenerational friendship with another adult who is 20 years older or younger than you. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you do not understand what you are reading, do not provide your signature on this consent form. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this consent form to participate. A copy of the form will be given to you so that you can find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the dynamics of intergenerational friendship, with a particular focus on exploring the unique advantages thereof. This study is being conducted as part of the final capstone project to fulfill the requirements of the student researcher's Master of Applied Positive Psychology program.

How long will I be in the study?

The interview with the student researcher will last 1 hour and will be conducted before the study ends on August 1, 2023.

What am I being asked to do?

If you agree to take part in the 1-hour interview, you will be asked to provide your perspective on a variety of questions related to your friendship(s) with people more than 20 years older or younger than you, including how you met, how you engage in the friendship, and the advantages or benefits you derive from the intergenerational friendship(s).

What are possible risks or discomforts?

Possible risks associated with participating in this interview include fatigue, boredom, and, while highly unlikely, breach of confidentiality. You will not be asked any questions of a sensitive nature.

What if new information becomes available about the study?

During this study, we may find more information that could be important to you. This includes information that, once learned, might cause you to change your mind about being in the study. We will notify you as soon as possible if such information becomes available.

How will I benefit from the study?

If you decide to be in this interview, it will help us learn more about intergenerational friendship. You may also benefit from positive emotions generated when discussing the benefits of your friendships.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

You will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for participating in the interview.

Will I have to pay for anything?

You will be asked to use your own personal computer or cellular device, and cellular data or Wi-Fi, to connect to the interviewer via phone or a web conferencing platform. You will not be compensated for this potential cost.

When is the Study over? Can I leave the Study before it ends?

This study is expected to end by August 1, 2023, after all participants have completed the interview, and all information has been collected. This study may also be stopped at any time because:

- The Primary Investigator feels it is necessary for the welfare, rights, or safety of participants. Such an action would not require your consent, but you will be informed if such a decision is made and the reason for this decision.

- The Principal Investigator has decided to stop the study.

If you decide to participate, you are free to leave the study at any time. You may do this by contacting the investigator noted on page one of this form. Should you withdraw from the study data from your interview audio recording and corresponding notes will be destroyed.

Could I be withdrawn from the study?

You could be removed from the study if you do not reply to the researcher's request to schedule an interview, or you do not show up at the scheduled time. The researcher will reach out to you twice to attempt to reschedule. If you are unable to reschedule after these attempts, the researcher will email you and call you to inform you of your withdrawal from the study.

How will my personal information be protected during the study?

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the course of this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania will have access to your de-identified records.

The audio recording and any information you give us during the interview will be kept confidential. The audio recording and other information you provide to us during the interview will be stored on an encrypted, password-protected, cloud-based server.

We may use quotes that you provide during the interview in the lead researcher's capstone paper. However, no protected information will be shared, so that no one will be able to connect you with your quote.

Your research data may be shared with investigators conducting other research; however, this information will *only* be shared in a de-identified manner (without protected information).

What may happen, in the future, to my information collected on this study?

The data that is collected during this study will be de-identified, which means that identifiers about you will be destroyed and will not be accessible to you after August 1, 2023. There is no chance of re-identification.

Future Use of Data

Your information will not be stored or shared for future research purposes.

Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research participant?

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should speak with the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the IRB at the number on page one of this form.

When you sign this form, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. This means that you have read the consent form, your questions have been answered, and you have decided to

volunteer. Your signature also means that you are permitting the University of Pennsylvania to use your personal information collected about you for research purposes within our institution. You are also allowing the University of Pennsylvania to disclose that personal information to outside organizations or people involved with the operations of this study.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you.

Name of Participant [**print**]

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

1. Pre-interview consent form review and interview overview:

First of all, thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin, I would like to spend about 10-15 minutes reviewing the purpose of this study, confirming your eligibility, and reviewing the consent form I emailed you. During this time please ask me any questions you may have. You can elect not to continue with the study at any time today, just let me know.

Before we review the consent form, let me briefly review that the purpose of this study is to better understand the dynamics of intergenerational friendships – in particular if there are unique advantages of intergenerational friendship, and if so, what those advantages are. I want to confirm a few things before we continue:

- a. Are you older than 18 years old and younger than 89 years old?
- b. Are you involved in an intergenerational friendship, that is, a friendship with someone who is at least 20 years older or younger than you?

I'll ask you between 10-15 questions about you and your intergenerational friendship over the next hour. I want to understand things from your perspective. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. Please be as honest as possible. If at any point you want to take a break or stop the interview just let me know.

Generally people can talk faster than I can type so I'd like to record our session once we begin. Is that alright with you? I will delete the video recording immediately after our conversation and will maintain the audio recording in a password-protected folder until August 1st. [Record]

Now let's review the consent form together. [Review form: If subject consents, secure electronic signature via Google form. If subject does not consent, thank them for their time and wrap up.]

Once we have finished the interview I will confirm your email address and within a 3 days will send you a \$25 Amazon gift card as a thank you for your participation. Do you have any questions? Thank you for completing the initial steps. Now we can begin the fun part!

2. Context

- a. Let's begin by you telling me a bit about yourself – your first name and a bit about your background?
- b. How do you spend your time? Are there specific activities you enjoy, such as art, music, sports, collecting, movement?
- c. What interested you in participating in this study?
- d. Before talking with me, what was your definition of intergenerational friendship and how did you feel about the concept?

3. Friendship

- a. Please tell me a bit about your friendships overall.
 - i. Do you tend to have a small group of close friends, a broad network of looser friendships, something in between, or something totally different?

- b. How would you describe yourself as a friend? What qualities do you believe you bring to your friendships? How might your friends describe you?
- c. What are some common characteristics of people with whom you are friends?
- d. Where have you made or met some of your closest friends? Could you share some of these experiences?
- e. Interviewer note: Check in with the interviewee to ensure they are comfortable and would like to continue. Remind them they can request a break any time.

4. Intergenerational Friendship – Now let's focus on your intergenerational friendship(s)

- a. How many close intergenerational friendships do you have? – Some, most, just 1
- b. Can you tell me about your most fulfilling intergenerational friendship?
- c. Interviewer note: Keep Opened and let participant talk here. Use the prompts if they haven't touched on them after their initial answer.
 - i. To start, how many years age difference is there – what is your friend's age?
 - ii. How did you meet?
 - iii. How did you continue to connect?
 - iv. When did you know the connection was a friendship?
 - v. How do you engage and communicate?
 - 1. What topics do you discuss?
 - 2. What activities do you do together?
 - 3. Have you discussed your age difference before, and if so, what was that conversation like?
 - vi. What are the benefits you get from this relationship?
 - 1. Are there any specific benefits that you attribute to the age difference, that may be different from the benefits you get from more similar-age friends?
 - 2. Do you think about the future of your intergenerational friendship? If so, what about?
 - vii. Are there any specific challenges that you attribute to the age difference?
 - viii. How do others react to your intergenerational friendship, if at all?
- d. Interviewer note: Give a 10-minute remaining verbal warning to the interviewee.
- e. *If applicable and time-permitting*, can you tell me about your other close intergenerational friend?
 - i. To start, how many years age difference is there – what is your friend's age?
 - ii. How did you meet?
 - iii. How did you continue to connect?
 - iv. When did you know the connection was a friendship?
 - v. How do you engage and communicate?
 - 1. What topics do you discuss?
 - 2. What activities do you do together?
 - 3. Have you discussed your age difference before, and if so, what was that conversation like?
 - vi. What are the benefits you get from this relationship?
 - 1. Are there any specific benefits that you attribute to the age difference, that may be different from the benefits you get from more similar-age friends?

2. Do you think about the future of your intergenerational friendship? If so, what about?
 - vii. Are there any specific challenges that you attribute to the age difference?
 - viii. How do others react to your intergenerational friendship, if at all?
- f. If you were to give advice to someone about the importance of intergenerational friendships, what would you tell them?
- g. Based on your experiences, what suggestions or strategies might you recommend to foster or strengthen intergenerational friendships in our communities? What elements do you think are critical for creating an environment conducive to these relationships?
- h. What unique aspects or advantages of intergenerational friendships haven't we discussed yet that you think are important?

5. Wrap Up:

- a. As we conclude, are there any questions you think would add to this conversation about intergenerational friendships or any final thoughts you'd like to share.
- b. This was a robust and important conversation. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experience and perspective. I will be completing all interviews by June 20, 2023, and then completing and submitting my final Capstone by July 15th, 2023. You will receive access to the Capstone once it has been approved, by the end of August, 2023. The audio recording and any identifying information about you will be deleted as of August 31, 2023.