

# Aging Well

## A New Perspective on Staying Young

Lois Wadsworth talks with Eugene writers Lauren Kessler and Tom Hager on their new book, *Staying Young*.

**"T**HERE IS A KIND of desperation in the title that we don't agree with philosophically," says journalist (and associate professor) Lauren Kessler on the new book co-authored by her and medical and scientific free-lance journalist Thomas Hager. *Staying Young*, published by Facts On File Publications, was released August 1. "The idea is that we do age, but we can have a high quality life as we age."

*Aging Well*, their working title for the book, was changed to *Staying Young* for marketing purposes. "The whole theory behind the book is to use whatever cards you're dealt genetically to your best advantage, to age as gracefully as possible," Tom says. "The idea is not that we can stay young, or that that's a value people should have," Lauren adds.

As the leading edge of the baby-boomers reaches the shores of the 40's, and the largest demographic bulge in the history of the world challenges all the institutions and social attitudes in its path, the hope is that aging itself will not only become more acceptable, but that people will begin preparing themselves in a positive sense to live healthy lives earlier.

"So many of the things we've been fed about growing older are incorrect," Tom says. "Gerontology is a young field. The first large-scale long-term studies set up in the 1950's are just now getting results," he says, noting that these studies have followed the same people through their active and healthy 30's, 40's, and into their 50's. Earlier studies were frequently done on inactive, ill, hospital populations of older people. Unfortunately, these earlier studies became "standards" that encouraged the stereotypes of older people as weak or wasted that still persist in the public mind.

To get the latest information, Tom and Lauren searched computer data bases and researched the scientific and medical literature on gerontology available through Sacred Heart, the U of O, and Oregon Health Sciences libraries. They wanted to know what constitutes normal aging in order to determine the effects of habits and lifestyle on the normal processes of the body as it grows older.

What they found is not startling—that moderate life-long exercise and good solid nutrition are the keys to aging well—but backed by thorough research, it is convincing.

"Most people think of exercise as a way to keep your weight down and stay fit, and that's certainly true," Lauren says. She points out that exercise is not only important for weight control, it is central to health as we grow older. It keeps the joints in working order, maintains muscle tone, brings stress under control, keeps the bones healthy, and aids the digestive system's functioning.

Tom reminds us that we evolved from hunters and gatherers who worked hard for long periods of time. The evidence suggests that many of



PHOTO BY DUNCAN McDONALD

Authors Tom Hager and Lauren Kessler.

the chronic ailments of old age are a result of not working hard enough. The old fashioned attitude toward older people was "take it easy, hold back, don't overdo it," as if the body just wore out as it aged. But current research holds that an under-used body "rusts out" before it wears out. Exercise. "Use it or lose it" is true.

It's never too late or too early to begin taking care of the body you are born with. The book is dedicated to Lauren's grandmother, Dorothy Falk, a "lively, irascible" woman who lived an active life to age 94, and to Lauren and Tom's 18-month old son, Jackson Kessler Hager.

Clearly, Tom Hager and Lauren Kessler consider good nutrition, exercise, biofeedback, meditation and relaxation techniques reasonable "alternatives" to a 40 percent fat diet that clogs the arteries and results in \$10,000 triple- or quadruple-bypass surgery. They found it comforting that common sense pays off for long-term health. "When older people exercise, the cardiovascular system responds almost immediately. It's (nearly) never too late to change bad habits," Tom says.

Lauren says she thinks the baby boom generation will insist on different images of aging. "They don't want to see images of themselves constipated or playing a little round of

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golf. They want to see what they want to be. This hard sell consumer marketing is disgusting, but it may be the saving grace." Tom says, "The marketing people are going to follow this population into its 60's." Lauren adds, "Our generation . . . will be the marketing people into our 60's."

*Staying Young* is a practical, down-to-earth guide on how to minimize the effects of growing older. Written without jargon in an entertaining and easy-to-follow style, the book is full of tips and fascinating facts.

*"Thunder thighs, saddlebags, love handles, spare tires—some 75 million Americans are weary warriors in the battle of the bulge. But studies show that less than one dieter in 10 is able to lose 20 pounds and keep it off for a year. One reason is that fat cells in the body are easily created and never die. They require very little energy to maintain themselves, and while they shrink in size, they are still there waiting to plump up again. The lesson here: Try not to accumulate fat cells to begin with."*

Arm yourself with the latest information on the aging process, and learn how you can improve your chances of living a long, healthy life.

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