

STAYING YOUNG

People with passion

Keeping the body and mind active, at any age

By Margit B. Weisgal, Contributing Writer



Avigdor Sapir is an avid world traveler.

Some people, no matter how old, are imbued with an energy that has the rest of us in awe. But, instead, we should use them as our role models, constantly reminding us that anything and everything is possible; all we have to do is just make the effort. Age is not a limitation. Ever.

Avigdor Sapir, world traveler

“When I turned 71, I decided it was time to retire – not to give up on life, just to stop working – and fulfill my childhood dream to backpack around the world,” Sapir relates. “I watched my children and grandchildren take similar trips and decided to take a page from their book and emulate them. For instance, I’m on my own and take only what I can carry on my back. No schedules, no deadlines, using local buses and trains. Over the one-month time limit I set, I meet fascinating people and take advantage of all the opportunities that cross my path.”

Sapir makes allowances for his age – sort of. Before setting off on his first excursion, he purchased a couple of nice walking sticks. He forgot them – somewhere – and couldn’t be bothered to backtrack, so now he just uses what he can find, like trimmed tree branches.

His first adventure followed the storied Silk Road, a trade route thousands of miles long between China and the eastern Mediterranean region that dates from around 300 B.C. As a child, he read all about Marco Polo, everything he could lay his hands on, so he was determined to follow in those footsteps.

Sapir started in China, going first to Xi’an to see the Terracotta Warriors, statues built between 246-206 BC, to protect the first emperor of China after his death. Row after row of these life-sized soldiers are armed and lined up, ready to do their duty. Next, he went to the Glass Bridge, the world’s longest and highest glass-bottomed bridge spanning over two mountains in Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon. Last was the Stone Forest, limestone formations that resemble trees and is one of the natural wonders of the world.

From there, he traced Marco Polo’s

route through Kyrgyzstan, then into Uzbekistan, visiting Samarkand, Tashkent and Bukhara, places where traders in their caravans, traversing the Silk Road, set up bazaars to trade goods.

Now 74, he makes two one-month trips each year. In Nepal, Sapir went paragliding and then climbed Poon Hill, 4,000 steps – 3,200 meters above sea level – with an unparalleled view of the Himalayas. In Sri Lanka, whitewater rafting. He went to Burma and, most recently, Peru. In March he’s off to Cuba and Guatemala.

Back home in Tel Aviv, Israel, he’s become a popular speaker, regaling audiences with tales of his various journeys. “I experience things I never thought possible,” says Sapir. “Treks in Nepal and Peru, visiting a Tibetan monastery with thousands of monks from ages 7 to 70, constantly meeting local people and tourists from different cultures. I collect these experiences, documented in photos and videos, and turn them into presentations, one for each trip. It’s a lot of work, but worth it as I get to relive all my adventures.”

He is now booked so often, it’s now paying for his travels. Various organiza-

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“You have this urge to create ... and you just do it!”

— Sarah Yerkes, 101-year old Passager poet

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tions, usually seniors or those over 50, invite him to present one of his six lectures; most ask him to return. To sit in on one of his presentations, you would never know there were ever any limitations. You can contact him at as@bluestonebd.com.

Kendra Kopelke, Passager Books

Although only recently retired, Kendra Kopelke works with septuagenarians, octogenarians and nonagenarians, reveling in being around people who remain involved with life and who motivate her daily.

Almost 30 years ago, Kopelke began a venture that will keep her active for years. A professor of poetry and writing at the University of Baltimore, she, along with co-editor Mary Azrael started Passager in 1990, a literary journal devoted to publishing works by those over 50 years of age. The genesis was when she taught a class for senior citizens. "Incredibly passionate, these students inspired me to let the world know about how creative they were in telling their stories, often revealing intimate portraits of their lives and experiences," says Kopelke

In 2005, Passager expanded to include publishing books: these included "anthologies, poetry collections, short fiction and memoirs by authors whose work has appeared in our journal," according to www.passagerbooks.com. Now, in addition to the literary journal's 67 issues, it has published over 30 books, all for sale on its website.

A poet herself, Kopelke is constantly in awe of those with whom she works. "Our press publishes. It's one thing to write. But there's a whole extra step when people read it. For our writers, it takes courage to put yourself out there. And poetry is such a specialized art form. It tells the truth. It's so incredibly personal, a form of art that is one person speaking to another, exposing their innermost thoughts. Our job is aiding in this transformation. Publishing these authors and giving them a forum – it's a beautiful thing."

One of Passager's authors is Sarah Yerkes, a 101-year-old poet whose first book, *Days of Blue and Flame*, was recently published. At 96, Yerkes had to give up sculpture, something she had done since she was 70 because she was no longer physically capable of using the heavy welding equipment required for her



Kendra Kopelke is the co-founder of Passager Books.

pieces. She then joined a poetry workshop at her retirement home.

Kopelke describes what it was like working with Yerkes. "You keep translating your own abilities due to physical limitations and you then translate your art into new forms. Poetry asked of her that she find her feelings and write about them. She did a reading at Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington, D.C., where 80 people turned out, ranging in age from teens to fellow seniors. As she read a poem about widows, you could see how she touched those who shared those emotions, those deeply held, hidden feelings you don't talk about or willingly share. She spoke from inside that community with honesty, humor and truth."

private demons in scribbles to come out from behind the shadows that have darkened my long and privileged life ... in a purgatory where I wait to pass through the open gates." He said being a poet was his last job.

Kopelke sums up what it's like to work with people in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. "We need to hear these people. Each decade as we age is distinct. We're filled with clichés, we're filled with flat phrases, we could list all the ways used to describe older people. Poets and writers want to find language and tell the story of aging in a way that's both truthful and new, revelatory. Morgenthau worked hard on his book. He did a reading at the University of Baltimore to over 100 people. Because he had a career as a poet, he was seen differently, so, as a result, he saw himself differently.

Passager and Kopelke provide ways for people of all ages to make a difference. "I'm a publisher," she says. "I worked with students who have published books. Now I do it for these different generations. They start to discover what they care about. Our job is aiding in this transformation. Publishing them gives them a forum.

"People think of us as printers – and that's the only thing we don't do. It's about how we accompany them from the manuscript to the book to the world. They were never shown how to make it come alive. We hold their hands and Passager provides ways for them to make a difference."

For Kopelke, the opportunity to keep changing how people view poetry, to expose more people to the truths poets give us that illuminate our lives, our feelings and our innermost thoughts, will keep her busy. More importantly, it keeps her passionate about life, connected to multiple generations, and constantly evolving. It also provides fodder for her next book. Age shouldn't stop us from moving forward. Despite platitudes that it's a "state of mind," there are the realities of age and how we manage physically. But working within those constraints, we shouldn't let anything stop of us from figuring out what we want to do and, then, how to make it happen. Backpacking to fulfill a dream or writing poetry, it comes down to a commitment to live in the present and future, not the past. Choose what you want and go for it. •

Passager's authors are also spokespeople for the possibilities available, despite or due to aging. There's a big difference, says Kopelke, when you have a poet in the room. It makes you think, "I can do that, too."

Another poet, Henry Morgenthau, III, from a famous family, was published at 99. "He raised the questions at a time of life when people start to reflect," relates Kopelke. "His poetry allowed him to ask important questions of himself: Who am I? I'm more than the son of ... or grandson of ... but who am I? For him, poetry was a flashlight on his inner self."

Morgenthau described his book of poems, *A Sunday in Purgatory*, with these words: "In these precious days I dress my