

# 'How old is old?' dispells myths and anxieties

By NORMA WEISMAN

"How old is old?" is an oft asked question. Joan Weisman asks it in the title of a recently published book for children—then answers in pictures and text.

Mrs. Weisman, tall, slender and attractive, is a longtime teacher and student in the field of human development. A lifelong resident of the Detroit area, she has been a widow for five years and is the mother of two

grown children. She resides in Southfield. "How Old is Old?" is her third children's book to be published. The first, called "Hooray for Bobo," was a tale of racial integration. Next she collaborated with artist Shirley Kallus, who did the illustration for a dinosaur story.

"My son inspired that one," she said. "I, and both my children, love that book. By the time it got to the publishers, the little fellow who loved dinosaurs so much was six feet tall

and more, and my little girl had graduated from college."

The current book on aging is designed to answer some questions and raise others, she explained.

Featured in the book are more than 30 photographs by an area photographer, Bob Benyas. Long interested in the social development of children, Mrs. Weisman's goal after college was to teach literature to young students.

HER EXPERIENCE teaching pre-

schoolers and then older children led to her becoming the first Head Start teacher in the Detroit area.

"That program and my participation in it is one of the important contributions in my life to the children, parents and volunteers."

"The concept was that you can have very little impact on children if you have them in a vacuum three or four hours in a day. By involving parents, neighbors and volunteers, we were able to get them, as well as the children, started forward."

Mrs. Weisman contends that follow-up studies done on children in Head Start programs which showed them dropping in IQ after a few years were not altogether valid.

"You can't measure friendships, values toward other kinds of people and other things with IQ tests," she said. "Furthermore, many of the neighborhood people went on to college. Some became teachers, and others achieved professionalism in other fields. Many are making valuable contributions to society."

It was during the time she worked with the Head Start youngsters that Mrs. Weisman decided there was a need for a book on aging.

"The children would ask questions about getting old that showed their anxieties in that area," she said.

When her husband died, she extended her leave of absence from teaching and began to study human

development. Ultimately, she earned a master's degree in human development and a special certificate in gerontology.

LATER, when she thought about her previous ideas to write a book on aging for children, her human development experiences gave her the impetus to finally do it.

"I realized that, by writing this book, I could also address myself to the concerns of older people," she said.

"One of the things my little book tries to show is that older people can do all kinds of things. They can do things between the generations, and they can work."

"How Old is Old?" tries to dispell the myth that older people can't learn, and also tries to break down fears of growing older.

"Society should have support systems to help people who have lost their families so that they don't become isolated," Mrs. Weisman said. "For those individuals who prefer to live alone and don't mind lack of company, there should be workers who visit. They could, as they do in Sweden, see that they have proper food, medical attention and whatever they need."

Mrs. Weisman believes that our society, with its youth cults, has been neglectful of its elders.

"In the United States we just

beginning to address ourselves to the problems of our older citizens and to set up many and varied types of support systems which are needed."

This month, Mrs. Weisman will begin teaching a course called "Aging and Society" in Birmingham through the Wayne State University College of Lifelong Learning.

And, as for other books to publish, she smiles and says: "I have dozens more lying around in the drawers."



JOAN WEISMAN

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