



Catherine Marienau
and Gail Zelitzky

WOMEN OVER 70

Reimagining Aging, Place,
and Possibilities

Aging Studies

Collection Editor

DAVID BETTS

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



WOMEN OVER 70

Catherine Marienau, Ph. D.
and Gail Zelitzky, M.A.

WOMEN OVER 70

Reimagining Aging, Place,
and Possibilities

Aging Studies
Collection Editor

David Betts



First published in 2026 by Lived Places Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790, Lived Places Publishing expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The authors and editors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication but assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or omissions. Likewise, every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any copyright material has been reproduced unwittingly and without permission, the publisher will gladly receive information enabling them to rectify any error or omission in subsequent editions.

Copyright © 2026 Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781917503273 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781917503297 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781917503280 (ePUB)

The right of Catherine Marienau and Gail Zelitzky to be identified as the Authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 184547 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com



To women over 70 who carry the torch for living with zeal and resolve. May your stories inspire each of us to envision aging not as an ending but as an unfolding of imaginative futures.

Acknowledgments

We celebrate the many voices and relationships that shaped this book. Hosting the podcast *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*[®] is an immeasurable privilege. Week after week we are in conversation with remarkable women who, as the title suggests, reimagine aging from a deep sense of place and a clear vision for the future. Their stories offer guidance and wisdom to women of all ages.

Choosing which podcast guests to illustrate the FLAMES of The Six Cs—**F**orming Community, **L**earning with Curiosity, **A**cting with Courage, **M**aking Contribution, **E**xpressing Creativity, and **S**howing Compassion—was a daunting task. For every woman we selected, countless others could have been included.

Translating this abundance of wisdom into a single volume was possible only with the steady support of many people who walked alongside us.

We are grateful for the excellent and encouraging support of the Lived Places Publishing community:

- **Janise Hurtig**, editor of the Education Studies Collection, for introducing us to **David Parker**, co-founder of Lived Places Publishing, and for endorsing our expertise.
- **David Parker**, for creating the Aging Studies Collection in time for us to make it our home and for his ongoing encouragement and support.
- **David Betts**, our editor, for his steady presence and thoughtful shaping of the manuscript.

We extend heartfelt thanks to our teammate, **Kristine Kruse**—podcast producer and social media manager—whose creativity, technical skill, and unwavering commitment are integral to the success and spirit of *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*®. Kristine ensures that each woman's story is heard clearly and shared widely.

Our writing colleagues and friends provided invaluable feedback and guidance:

- **Amber Robbin**, whose perspective comes from a younger age group, provided editing insights that heighten interest.
- **Brigid O'Shaughnessy**, who reviewed every chapter—often more than once—brought conceptual insight, meticulous editing, and deep commitment to engaging the reader.
- **David Janey**, who read the text with an educated eye for what's missing, offered a perspective that broadened the scope of the content.
- **Debra Robbin**, whose background in gender issues informed her thinking like the reader and always asked, "*What am I learning from reading this?*"
- **Karen Marienau**, who, especially in the early and roughest stages, offered precision editing delivered with kindness and encouragement.
- **Kathleen Taylor**, whose feedback sharpened both clarity and nuance, with a gift for the clever turn of phrase.
- **Kathy Brown** whose attention to readability inspired new energy.
- **Margaret Burk's Legacy Writing Group**, gifted writers whose active-listening feedback—often beginning with

"I'm curious about ..."—helped us strengthen both clarity and intention.

- **Phyllis Walden**, who offered insights from feminist philosophy and whose responses always began with the essential question: *"What do you want your readers to learn?"*
- **Steve Olsher**, whose keen eye for spotting media trends opened the door for the *Women Over 70* journey. It wouldn't have happened without him.

In preparing this manuscript, we used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to support language refinement. The voice, analyses, and final content are entirely our own.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to our families and friends whose encouragement and support buoyed us throughout the writing of this book.

This work is a tribute to the women whose voices remind us that aging is not simply a passage of time, but an unfolding—as women continue to shape their lives with courage, creativity, and possibility.

Abstract

In a culture that often sidelines older women, *Women Over 70: Reimagining Aging, Place, and Possibilities*[®] shares the inspiring voices of women, ages 70–110. Through intimate, place-based narratives, they defy ageist assumptions and portray aging as a time of learning, engagement, and possibility. More than a collection of stories, the book illuminates aging through women's experiences of creativity, contribution, courage, and belonging, within the social contexts that shape their lives. This book will speak to students and scholars in Women and Gender Studies, Sociology, and Gerontology, as well as readers of any age seeking company, insight, and inspiration about growing older.

Key words

Ageism/Ageist/Aging; Community; Curiosity; Courage; Contribution; Creativity; Compassion; Legacy; Myths & Truths; Women

Contents

Meet Catherine and Gail	xii
Chapter 1 Reimagining life after 70: FLAMES and the six C's	1
Chapter 2 Myths and truths about older women	5
Chapter 3 Forming community	15
Chapter 4 Learning with curiosity	29
Chapter 5 Acting with courage	39
Chapter 6 Making contribution	51
Chapter 7 Expressing creativity	63
Chapter 8 Showing compassion	79
Chapter 9 Legacies entrusted, futures imagined	93
References	97
Index of Concepts	103
Index cited podcast guests	105

Meet Catherine and Gail



We would like you to know something about us—why and how we are committed to shining a light on older women’s experiences of aging and their crucial places in our society. What follows is our shared and individual journey: how podcasting became our origin story, how our lives shaped this work, and

how learning continues to guide us as co-travelers, not just chroniclers, of aging.

Origin story: How we became podcasters

We, Gail (age 84) and Catherine (age 77), care deeply about mature women, especially those over 70. We met in 2009 when Gail entered a self-designed graduate program at DePaul University's School for New Learning where Catherine served as Gail's faculty mentor. We soon discovered a common interest in women's issues and continued our conversations after Gail graduated in 2015, just shy of her 74th birthday. In 2018, Gail planned to start a podcast to interview 70 women over 70. This struck a chord with Catherine as she had spent many decades conducting qualitative interviews focusing on women's lived experience. Catherine was planning to leave her tenured faculty position and, without even being asked, said *"I'm in, if you'll have me!"* In 2019, *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*[®] podcast was born. (www.womenover70.com).

Catherine was a novice about podcasts while Gail had considerable exposure through her son's training seminars in new media. We participated in a six-week online course for novice podcasters and attended a three-day in-person symposium. While the learning curve was steep for both of us, undaunted, we forged ahead to launch our podcast. It has now grown into a worldwide community with over 370 episodes (releasing one per week) and listeners in 120 countries. Our intention is to lift up the active voices of older women to dispel myths and stereotypes, to disrupt ageism, and to modernize the societal narrative about aging. Our award-winning podcast is part of a global movement

guided by the wisdom and leadership of women in their 70s and well beyond.

Catherine's story

I grew up in the company of women who told stories while they worked. Family often gathered in the farmhouses of both sets of grandparents in rural Minnesota. There I found my way to the women's circles, drawn in by the blend of conversation, humor, and shared tasks. In these circles, a seed of understanding was planted: women's stories are a form of knowledge.

My grandmother Matilda, whom my mother cared for in her later years, was one of my first guides. After mother and I finished household chores during our weekly visits, I would settle beside Grandma watching her crochet lace doilies and listening as she described "*the olden times*". She talked about her days as a mid-wife, hitching up the horse and wagon to reach women in labor across the county, arriving at all hours to help bring new lives safely into the world. At larger family gatherings, my aunts told stories over boiling pots of lye for the lutefisk or across the stretch of a quilting frame—accounts of hardship, perseverance, and the creativity woven into their daily lives.

For my first six years, I lived with my parents and paternal grandparents, who introduced me to sewing, milking cows, gathering eggs, canning vegetables, and prayer. My grandmother Agnes, a one-room country schoolteacher before her marriage, nurtured my love of reading and learning.

My great-grandmother Mary also lived with us. She was my closest companion, and I delighted in her stories—told while we

played card games, usually Rook, made mud pies among the trees, or followed our nightly ritual of having me unbind her braids and brush her long, thick hair. Her stories were of riding spirited horses bareback, marrying a restless man, raising sons who sowed wild oats, and making a life from very little, entirely by hand.

The older women in my family circles were smart in the ways of farming, raising children, and serving the community, while surmounting hardships with determination and grace. Their steady presence helped me see that intelligence lives well beyond classrooms and institutions.

Finding my way forward

Although I was a strong student in high school and loved learning, higher education was never assumed in my family—and I barely understood what college meant. When teachers began asking where I planned to attend, I told my parents I was going to college rather than secretarial school. They made clear that this path was neither expected nor supported, that they could not afford it, and that *“our kind of people don’t go to college”*. Still, I aspired to more, and I went anyway. I worked my way through the University of Minnesota, exploring journalism, social work, and American studies before discovering cultural anthropology. The field gave me a language for what I had absorbed since childhood: that people’s stories illuminate the worlds they inhabit—and, in profound ways, *are* their realities.

My education did not end with coursework or disciplinary discovery. I was beginning to sense that learning was also shaped through relationships and responsibility—through working

alongside people whose lives differed profoundly from my own. Their experiences challenged my assumptions about who knowledge belongs to and whom education should serve. During my undergraduate years, I worked as an academic tutor at the HELP Center (Higher Education for Low Income People), which provided academic, financial, and personal support for students on the margins—people of color, men recently released from prison, women raising children on public aid, and international students far from home. Their stories expanded my understanding of education's transformative potential when lived experience is recognized as a source of knowledge.

That awareness shaped my professional path. I remained at the University of Minnesota to begin my career in 1972 with the innovative University Without Walls degree program for adult learners. For the next decade, I directed the program and mentored hundreds of learners, mostly women, listening to their stories about who they were becoming and their intentions to continue to make a difference for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Taking a page from the adult students, I went back to school while working full-time. Using my work as an experiential learning laboratory, I earned a Master of Arts in Educational Anthropology and Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, with a focus on innovative adult higher education.

Centering on women's development

A defining moment came in 1980, near the end of my doctoral studies. In a room of 30 women educators, we heard a leading

theorist report that women score lower than men on measures of both intellectual and moral development. His assertion ran counter to everything I knew from mentoring women and from the generations of strong, capable women who shaped me. That moment clarified my commitment to telling a fuller, truer story of women's development.

When I joined DePaul University's School for New Learning in 1983, I created the school's first courses on women's issues, focusing on psychological and social development. Over 36 years, I taught variations of those courses and worked closely with adult women learners whose experiences continually broadened my understanding of "self, voice, and mind".

In 1990, at age 41, my life unexpectedly widened. My second husband and I adopted a baby girl from Peru, and in an instant, I became a first-time mother. That experience reshaped my place in the world. In my women's circles—spaces I had long held as a listener and facilitator—I was able to share my own stories. Motherhood, partnership, identity, play, and joy—my life had rich new chapters to bring to the table.

In 2015, my interests in women's lives also expanded, leading to a pivotal focus on women and aging. My colleague and friend Karla Klinger (ep. 137), 15 years older than I, wanted to investigate, *"How do women live vitally in their 70s and beyond?"*. Under her leadership, we launched the Vital Women's Project, a longitudinal study of 15 Midwestern women journeying from their 70s into their late 80s.

We explored how women think about and experience aging—what strengthens them, what reshapes them, what they accept

and refuse. I began this study at age 55, motivated largely by intellectual curiosity; a decade later, my interest had also become deeply personal.

These women shared important insights about aging: living more by choice than by obligation; wanting intimacy and pleasure, not just sex; and seeking spiritual awareness beyond religious doctrine. The voices of these older women convinced me that their insights, and mine, aren't simply interesting—they are essential.

A home for my lifelong work

In 2019, as I turned 70 and prepared to retire from my full-time faculty position, Gail and I launched *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*®. This work draws on everything my career and life have centered on: teaching, mentoring, researching, writing, and learning from women whose experiences challenge negative assumptions about aging and about being women. When Gail and I sat behind the microphones for the first ten recorded interviews, it felt less like starting something new (although podcasting itself was frighteningly new) and more like a continuing journey I'd been on for decades.

Women Over 70 offers a home for my enduring belief—that older women's lives are extraordinarily textured; lived experience engenders wisdom; and aging, if we let it, is a lifelong path to be celebrated. The stories of our podcast guests are powerful, illuminating, and urgently needed. My lifelong path, rooted in those early women's circles, has brought me here: amplifying the voices of older women so their curiosity, courage, contributions, creativity, and compassion—always with community in mind—are recognized as essential.

Gail's story

I did not set out to advocate for women over 70. I spent a lifetime building businesses, raising children, surviving loss, and reinventing myself more times than I care to remember. As I entered my 70s, I noticed how older women somehow became invisible. They seemed to disappear. These were vibrant, vital women and their wisdom went unnoticed; their lives, rich with experience and accomplishment, rarely acknowledged.

I was in my prime, physically and mentally active, and it was inconceivable to me that all I had worked for could suddenly be erased. Still, I recognized at a few meetings I attended, it sometimes took speaking up with greater intensity to be acknowledged. Too often my ideas weren't accepted until someone else repeated them. I began to ask questions: *Who are we as we age? What are we becoming? What is possible now?*

We've all heard stories of celebrities and heads of companies and women in the limelight—women like Sonia Sotomayor and Oprah Winfrey—but where were the stories of everyday, extraordinary women, the quiet sheroes to their organizations, communities, chosen families, and friends? This thinking became the seed of *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*®. I became unsettled, not by aging itself, but how easily a lifetime of relevance could be dismissed.

What was my life like growing up?

My father was extremely creative. My mother was inspirational. I was very young when the idea of becoming a woman business owner was planted. Long before I could name it, I was absorbing

creativity, reinvention, and leadership. I was only 8, in 1949, when Dad began considering the future of small 'ma & pa' liquor stores.

My grandfather (Poppy) had emigrated from Ukraine and opened a liquor store. My American-born grandmother (Ba-doll) helped run it. I remember fondly the lunchtimes I spent with her at their apartment near my elementary school. Our conversations shaped my understanding of what it meant to be a woman growing up during that time, the resilience it took, the compromises made.

When Poppy suffered a major stroke in his 50s, my father took over the business, giving up forever the idea of going to college. In 1948, big box retailers, like Jewel and Liquor Barn, were entering the market. Walgreens and Osco began to sell liquor. Dad was a visionary and realized something had to change for small liquor stores if they were to compete against these chains. He envisioned self-service liquor stores and later, a cooperative model that allowed independent owners to unite under one name while retaining autonomy. This vision became Foremost Liquor Stores®. From the beginning I understood the value he was providing and the power of championing small business.

My journey took many twists and turns before I found my path

At 18, in 1959, it was unthinkable for a woman to join the family business. Instead, I earned my Bachelor of Education degree at National College of Education (now National Louis University) in Evanston, IL. At the time, it felt less like a choice than the natural order of things.

I never became a full-time teacher. In 1961, at 19, I married my first husband and was pregnant before graduation. Like many

women of that era, the question became: *"Who was going to stay home with the children?"* A miscarriage, a daughter and two sons later, I was still at home in 1976, when my husband left us. There was no money, no help—only the urgency of keeping my children safe and our lives intact.

Now in my 30s, I faced an impossible dilemma. My second child struggled with severe mental and behavioral challenges. I could not fathom holding a full-time job. My father offered a lifeline. *"Come work for Foremost and you'll have the flexibility you need."* Soon it became apparent this child needed more help than local services provided. His psychiatrist suggested Menninger Clinic in Topeka, KS who had a reputation for reducing the effect of childhood schizophrenia in children. For three years I flew monthly to Kansas. These were difficult times. Still, for the sake of my other children, we found our way forward.

In 1980 I married again to a remarkable man. Four years later, I was promoted to president of our family business. For the first time I believed in my own capability and authority. After selling Foremost in 1994, my younger son and I became partners and built Liquor by Wire® into a multi-million dollar international catalog company for alcohol beverage gifts. This success solidified something deeper. I no longer felt as though I was borrowing confidence; I felt deserving.

Advocacy and leadership became the norm

As I look back on my career, my focus was always on small businesses and women business owners. Their success was

my passion. Over the years, I consulted, mentored, and found my own voice to advocate for them—amplifying their voices and celebrating their successes. I learned early that women did not lack talent; they lacked permission. Now submerged in the business community—writing, coaching and serving on numerous committees, I was elected President of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO Chicago). Believing in the importance of intergenerational connection and frequently paired as a co-mentor for Chicago Innovation’s Ageless Innovators, I gained as much as I gave. Creating Wonder Women Mastermind Club in 2018, an early online coaching and networking group for women business owners, put me squarely in the digital world before it became common.

The importance of women in my life

Women are central to my life. Close to my mother, grandmother, and aunts, I cherish the friends I’ve made through the years, some lasting 80 years! Friends saved me, raised me up, and helped shape the woman I am today. As explored in the *Forming community* chapter, our lives evolve and we are best served by finding communities that reflect who we are now.

One dream remained. A year before meeting my keeper husband, I enrolled in Loyola University’s MBA program. When Al came into my life, something had to give. I was working full-time, children still at home, and making room for a new love. From the moment we met, I knew he was the missing piece—the intimate

connection I had been longing for. So I left Loyola. Thirty years later, after Al died in 2009, I returned to graduate school, this time at DePaul University's School for New Learning, where I could design my own course of study. I knew immediately what it would be: *Creativity and Innovation to Help Small Businesses Grow*.

Only later did I understand what fate had in store. The DePaul faculty mentor assigned to me was Catherine Marienau. What began as a student-mentor relationship, grew after graduation, into a creative partnership. In 2019, Catherine and I co-founded my latest entrepreneurial venture: *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*®, our award-winning podcast.

The podcast

Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined® began as a desire to listen and learn about what life looks like for women as they move through their 70s and beyond. Catherine and I both realized how little our society really understands women in their later years. What we discovered was not decline, but expansion. The women we interview have become a global community—heard in 120 countries.

From that listening emerged the Aging Reimagined Circle—our monthly online membership community for women, where spirited exchange and meaningful connection flourish—as well as our live symposia, day-long activities centered on celebrating life as we age. We continue to learn from the women whose stories we share and to spotlight the books they write—fiction, nonfiction, memoir, and poetry. What began as a podcast has become a flourishing community, one that insists aging is not an ending, but an invitation.

For me, this work is personal. I have spent a lifetime championing women. Our mission for *Women Over 70: Aging Reimagined*® is to change how society thinks and talks about older women's place in the world. At this stage of my life, there is no other work I would rather be doing.

Our pursuit of learning

Much like the women whose stories gift our podcast, we, too, walk the lifelong learning path with curiosity as our compass. Both of us are proud recipients of the Lifelong Learning Award from DePaul's School for New Learning—a reminder that as much as we have already learned about women and aging, we have much more to discover.

Our learning communities are many and ever evolving. We grow in conversation with the Age-Wise Collective, a vibrant group of women podcasters elevating older women's lived experience. We share our insights with groups and organizations eager to explore the dynamic lives of older women. Together with our integral team member, Kristine Kruse, we form a powerful learning trio.

Our curiosity takes us into national dialogues with AARP, the American Society on Aging (ASA), the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and its former affiliate the National Center to Reframe Aging. Locally, we collaborate and learn with AARP-Illinois, Concordia University Chicago Center for Gerontology, Chicago Innovation, Arbor West Neighbors, and Skyline Villages Chicago, as well as with residents and staff at life plan communities including Plymouth Place and The Admiral at the Lake.

Along the way, we have earned certificates from *Reframing the Narrative on Aging, Ageism and Culture in Gerontology* (ASA), and *Write to Change the World* (The OpEd Project). We have also received significant recognition for highlighting women and aging: 2023 *Turn the Page on Age* award from Chicago Innovation; 2025 Women in Podcasting, number one in Society & Culture; and 2025 *ASTRA Inaugural Podcast Spotlight Award* from the Hollywood Creative Alliance. Each engagement reminds us that learning is not merely something we pursue; it is the driving force behind our mission: to illuminate, honor, and celebrate the insight, wisdom, and vitality of women as we age.

Learning is our shared practice of reimagining aging—an ongoing journey that continues to expand our understanding of ourselves, each other, and the powerful stories of women over 70. And we carry this simple truth forward: there is always more to learn, more possibilities to imagine, and fulfilling futures to create.

How to use this book

Whether you are reading this book as part of a course, for personal insight, or for professional development, we invite you to approach aging with curiosity, openness, and the willingness to question long-held assumptions. This book is not only for reading; it is for reflecting, engaging, and acting.

Learning objectives

By connecting with these stories and ideas, and by engaging with the Invitations for Reflection, you will be able to:

1. Recognize distinctions between myths and realities about older women;
2. Explore how age intersects with gender, race, class, and other “isms”;
3. Appreciate the diversity among older women’s lived experiences across cultural and geographic contexts;
4. Link women’s stories to concepts and research on aging, gender, identity, place, and social justice;
5. Identify and challenge your own limiting beliefs about aging; and
6. Advocate knowledgeably against ageism in academic, professional, public, and private spheres.

1

Reimagining life after 70: FLAMES and the six C's

The main character in May Sarton's *As We Are Now* (1992) compared old age to another country—a place we rarely imagine until we find ourselves living there. For decades, this metaphor has shaped how many of us think about growing older: distant, unfamiliar, even undesirable. Yet this view reflects less about aging itself and more about the stories our culture chooses to tell.

Today, a vibrant pro-aging movement is rewriting that narrative. Since June 2019, *Women Over 70—Aging Reimagined*® has been part of that movement as the active voice of and for older women. Through our podcast, we have interviewed over 370 vital, engaged women ages 70 to 110, learning firsthand how they design lives of meaning, purpose, and joy. Their stories—and our own growing awareness as older women—reveal a rich, nuanced landscape of aging that is far from the stereotypes that dominate public attitudes and conversation.

Spanning four decades of lived experience, these women's lives traverse a wide range of identities and places. They represent multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds and a spectrum of sexual orientations. Some grew up in small rural towns, others in

dense urban neighborhoods or along shifting national borders. They have made homes in industrial cities and farming communities, coastal towns, and inner-ring suburbs. They include artists, activists, educators, caregivers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and community builders—roles that resist simple categorization and are shaped by the places in which they were forged.

Especially striking is how these women have reimagined their place in the U. S.—and in the specific communities where they have lived and worked. They came of age in schools, workplaces, religious institutions, and civic organizations that were often inhospitable to females, particularly women of color and those who defied conventional gender roles. Their early identities were shaped as much by where they were allowed to be as by who they were encouraged to become. Over time, they challenged those limits—reshaping classrooms, neighborhoods, professions, and public spaces—so that girls and women could claim a fuller and more powerful place in society.

What characterizes these women over 70 is not a single profile but their variety—a reminder that older women are among the most diverse and dynamic groups in society. Within this diversity, we also discovered powerful common threads. As we engaged with hundreds of recorded conversations and reflected on them, we attended to the deeper meanings beneath the women's stories—the experiences, values, and internal shifts that shape a woman's life as she ages. Using an approach grounded in lived experience and attentive to meaning and essence (Sultan, 2018), we were struck by how often the same qualities surfaced. It felt as though the women were collaborating with us—guiding us toward the themes that mattered most. Their voices were further