

# ELDERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

In the name of taking care of our elders, we take away from them the very thing that is making them happy. Dr Emi Kyoto, Dr Taryn Patterson, Dr Yashuhiro Tanaka together with Bihani Social Venture are working to enrich the lives of Nepali elders. They talk about their cause, the need for integrated societies and the positives of having a strong community.

Dr Emi Kyoto founder of Ibasho is an environmental gerontologist, educator, and organisational culture change expert, and Dr Yashuhiro Tanaka coordinator and board member of Ibasho are both committed to making a community where elders are strong and independent. They are gravely aware of the implications of a rising ageing population in the world and know that things need to change. Dr Taryn Patterson, another Ibasho Board of Director and health service researcher for a member organization, Leading Age in the United States actively works with elders to provide health and other services. These three individuals with the help of Ibasho want to foster an environment where both young and the older generation work together to influence social and economic aspects of the country and have decided to make Nepal their current project.



www.photosfile.com Rakesh Shrestha

Dr Emi Kyoto

## Varying Nation but Similar Elders

On being asked about the difference in elders in various countries Dr Emi Kyoto has an interesting reveal, "I am always surprised when people ask me how Nepali/African/Japanese/ other elders are... to me, they are all the same, they want to feel belonged, loved and respected". According to her the actual difference are not in the elders but in the facilities and culture available to them. In developed countries because of their strong financial ability elders are

able to get resources in a very systematic manner. They also have high level of security in the form of insurances. However, in developing countries although they are lacking in good health services there is a strong sense of community amongst one another and the elders as well, often having large extended families where the oldest member has a key role in family decision making. "Both kinds of nations have room to learn. Developing nations need to focus on providing better financial and health services to such

elders, whereas developed nations need to learn to actively involve elders in the community" Dr Yashuhiro adds.

## Elders as Agent of Change

The growth in aging population around the world signals for a need for change in social structure, we need to start viewing aging differently. "The mentality held by many is such that once someone reaches a certain age they are unable to give anything back to the society, which is very inaccurate" Dr Emi states.





Dr Yashuhiro Tanaka



Dr Taryn Patterson

Years of practice and rigid social structure has made everyone believe that only the young are able to make changes. Dr Taryn explains "We here at Ibasho want to challenge this redundant belief. Both parties - despite the age - have a lot to learn from one another. For instance, a youngster can help elders understand and use technology to their advantage. Whereas, an elder can help youngsters deal with life issues and any subject they may have mastered over the years."

However, all three agree that for an environment where elders can prosper there needs to be a flow of communication and relationship building. Both parties need to change their mind set. The youth need to learn to respect elders, give them freedom to make choices, while the elders themselves need to have enough self confidence to know that they are still able to engage and become agents of change.

### Simple Changes - Big Results

Simple changes in the way we conduct ourselves in front of our elders can have a huge impact. Dr Yashuhiro says "Letting them carry out their daily routine such as gardening, cooking, as allowing them to create a cozy environment for themselves, will give elders something to look forward

to everyday."

"Even to children we give them the ability to make decisions, teach them every step of the way to think and act for themselves. Similarly elders need to be given the same power and control over theirs. We need to start treating elders like people and know that they have the same needs as us. They should not be stripped from making decisions or having the ability to make choices. It is usually the simple things that make the difference, so simply allowing them to exercise freedom will boost their self esteem and confidence." Dr Taryn adds.

Ibasho wants to treat elders as assets to the community. This will reduce the burden that younger generations feel when it comes to making decisions and reduce the problem of elders feeling rejected by society. According to a UCSF study, people who are 60-years-old and above usually reports feelings of loneliness, because of which there is 45 percent increase in their risk of death. Hence, Ibasho is working to provide valuable relationship added responsibility to elders so that they are given a purpose and passion during old age.

Usually, in the name of respect and love we take away from them their ability to make choices. Instead of looking at elders as someone we need to provide care for,

Ibasho was born out of the experience of its founder, Dr. Emi Kiyota, who lived with elders in long term care facilities as part of her graduate research. While the staff in these facilities did their best to provide residents with a safe place to live, the elders still experienced feelings of loneliness, boredom, helplessness, and desperation. No one had planned on ending up in a long-term care facility, and no one wanted to live there.

Unfortunately, aging is not an option; it is a natural part of our lives that nobody can avoid. This brings difficult questions: Would I be comfortable with having my loved one in this situation when the time comes? Would I be able to face these living conditions myself? If not, then what can we do to improve people's later years?

The challenge is not about luxury. Beautiful buildings, furniture, and decorations will not make people happy.

It is our time to explore options to live our old age with meaning, and we as users should be a part of the creation of a community where we live. All elders should have more to say about where and how to live, to be a part of community, and to be useful to others.

Therefore, it is time for us to shift our way of thinking in order to live a more authentic life in our old age. We should be realistic about aging and the physical changes that we must adjust to, but continue the aspects of life we are used to. Elders say "Please be real with me, because I can take it. Please do not paint the beautiful picture on the surface to pretend everything is fine."

we should focus on building relationships with them. Dr Emi says "Care is often used for something that happens in a one sided manner, but becoming friends with elders, communicating with them, will give them the dignity and inter dependence they deserve, instead of care which may makes them feel helpless and weak"

What is next for Ibasho "Initially, I started Ibasho merely because I saw a need for it, it was only later that I was able to see that many other countries could benefit from it." Dr Emi says. Adamant about not wanting to "mcdonaldlize" Ibasho, Dr Yashuhiro stresses the importance of doing smaller projects with precision and dedication to ensure effectiveness. Currently, only looking at

two countries Nepal and Phillipines, Ibasho wants to monitor few projects carefully to understand the complexities of culture in these nations, and explore effective techniques.

When asked about the success measurement of such projects, Dr Emi talked about monitoring the changes in the elders themselves, "we look at their interaction level, energy level and other non measurable factors to see if the program has made any effect on their lives."

In a world where most organisations focus on the younger generation and their development, Ibasho is looking out for elders who despite their age still have the capability and capacity to contribute to the world.