

Interviews with icons yield lessons on productivity in 'Wisdom Years'

March 30 2023



Nebraska's Ken Kiewra led interviews with a series of older adults, including Husker volleyball coach John Cook and broadcasting legend Judy Woodruff. Among the lessons gleaned? “All of them recognized that you don't want to just stop doing your life's work and then wonder what's next.”. Credit: Craig Chandler | University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The Wonder Years can be great, sure: first loves, long summers, panoramic dreams exclusive to those with a lifetime of runway. The

Working Years, too: established identity, new family and old friends, freedom to pursue personal goals and professional satisfaction.

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Ken Kiewra just doesn't want you to forget about the Wisdom Years. They got the name from famed psychologist Erik Erikson, who roughly defined them as starting at age 65, often considered a mile-marker of retirement in the United States.

But whereas Erikson saw the Wisdom Years as bathed in twilight—a period for reflection on a life lived, one ready to be filtered through a lens of regret or fulfillment—Kiewra and others have come to perceive those years less as the end of the road, more as an on-ramp to others.

Kiewra, a professor of educational psychology at Nebraska, has spent much of his career studying the cultivation of talent and the productivity of those who possess it. It was while teaching a course on [creativity](#) and talent development that Kiewra and two of his students, Jessica Walsh and Chris Labenz, first considered exploring the Wisdom Years via a series of interviews with people making the very most of them. With support from the university's Center for Transformative Teaching, they would do just that.

Some of the interviewees—Husker volleyball coach John Cook, broadcast journalist Judy Woodruff—have maintained their early passions well into later life. Others, including a trio known as the Wander Women, decided to radically reorient their lives at the very time that some begin thinking about winding down.

Those in-depth interviews, and the lessons on Wisdom Years living that the team would later distill from them, are detailed in a paper recently published in *Educational Psychology Review*. Kiewra sat down with Nebraska Today to chat about the importance of lifelong pursuits, the value of following bliss, and the best ways to acknowledge aging without

kowtowing to it.

How did this study come to be? What spurred you to interview, as you put it in the paper, 'those who shun conventional retirement and continue to produce meaningful work'?

I had done a number of talent studies—looking at prodigious talent across all sorts of domains, and particularly the roles that parents play in developing it. I had also done research on productive scholars and what makes them so productive. So we were kind of looking for a new entry point.

As I'm moving along in my career, and in my own Wisdom Years, I've been curious what I can do as I approach retirement. Do I want to go off to pasture? Or do I want to remain productive? What have others done? What are the success stories of productivity during the Wisdom Years? So that was the impetus for studying this.

How did you decide on who to interview?

We chose Judy Woodruff, who's one of the highest-ranking people in the news world, because one of our co-authors, Jessica Walsh, is interested in journalism. Rich Mayer is perhaps the greatest educational psychologist ever on the planet. That's my and Chris Labenz's field, so he was an obvious choice, and I had interviewed him for other studies on productive scholars. John Cook: We're all Nebraska volleyball fans, and he has had an amazing career. You couldn't find probably a more successful coach anywhere to interview, so he was a good and easy choice.

At the time we were formulating the study, we had been reading about

Nancy Shank, who was a professor and administrator here at the University of Nebraska who had switched careers, moving from the professorial ranks to becoming a playwright. And we were really interested in that, because that was such a stark departure—to basically quit your day job and go in a completely different and unpaid direction. So she was an important and interesting choice.

Who better than John Rosenow, who wrote a book on the Wisdom Years and who, at age 21, had founded the Arbor Day Foundation? And he's local. So he was a wonderful choice.

And the last one actually came from my daughter, who's a committed naturalist and hiker. She knew well of three female adventurers, known as the Wander Women, who literally quit their jobs, sold their possessions and set out to discover America on foot with these incredible thousands-of-miles hikes through the American wilderness. So we just had to speak to them, and we were so grateful that they took the time on the trail to speak with us.

Your interviews yielded multiple lessons for how to remain productive and find meaning in later life. What are some of the lessons that especially resonated with you?

One was that none of these people wanted to retire. And if they were going to quote-unquote retire, they were going to retire *to* something, not *from* something. All of them recognized that you don't want to just stop doing your life's work and then wonder what's next.

Another lesson is: Follow your bliss. All of these people, throughout their careers, were doing things that they love. Theirs were labors of love, like never going to work in the first place. And whether they stayed or strayed the course, they were truly following their bliss. For example, Nancy Shank loved her job at the university, but there was something

greater calling her. She had this desire, this need, this passion to create, to write—to write a play, to write a novel.

So she was somebody who was certainly following her bliss. Who better than Rich Mayer to personify this? Years ago, Mayer could have retired from his university position at full pay—and yet he continues to work for the same salary. How many of us would do that? But his view is, "Why should I retire? I love what I'm doing. I'm curious about the things that I'm investigating. There is nothing I'd rather do."

I don't believe these people were living to work. I think they saw their work as joyful, playful. Psychologist Howard Gardner is famous for studying creative people—outstanding, extraordinary creators—and all of them had this sort of childlike perspective, this childlike joy about what they do. That's what I saw, again and again, with those we interviewed: an incredible passion, a bliss. For them, this wasn't work.

Were you surprised by any of what the interview subjects had to say?

Maybe not surprised, because I've seen this happen among other talented people I've studied, but there was a bit of serendipity, a dash of luck, or the idea of the universe conspiring, if you will, to make something happen. Perhaps the best example involved the Wander Women, who went to see a financial adviser to chart out the rest of their lives and their finances—and being told that, in several years, in their 70s, they could finally retire.

Then they leave that meeting with financial figures and pie charts stirring in their heads. They go to a little coffee shop, and there, on a shelf, they spot a book about changing the nature and direction of your life. They open the book, and the first line is, "Quit your job." What if

they don't go to that coffee shop? What if they don't see that book? Where are they now? Are they still in their self-described mildly satisfying jobs? Likely so. Think of all the experiences, and all the living, that they might have missed had they stumbled upon or somehow been directed to that book.

It just seems that, in any case where I interview somebody with talent, there's always one or two intersecting points in their lives where, without something serendipitous, almost mysterious, occurring, they may never have gone in a certain direction. I just find that fascinating. Now, the other part of that, of course, is that people always have opportunities and always have choices. It's the choices they make that actually will define them and the lives they live. The Wander Women could have seen that book and chose to ignore it. But they didn't.

American society often seems to focus on youth—how to continue looking and feeling young, especially. How do you think this study might contribute to the discourse around youth and aging?

All the Wisdom Years people recognized their vulnerabilities, saying things like, "I'm a bit worried about my memory. I have to hold the banister now. I had to change my daily routine and get more sleep and more exercise." All of them recognized the frailties of life and aging, yet found ways to counteract that or reduce that. Mayer, for example, now uses a monthly paper calendar to record appointments and long-term goals, a yellow pad to list weekly goals and plans, and Post-it notes to signal what he plans to accomplish that day.

These people were deliberate and intentional in how they're going to remain productive despite the frailties of aging. And I believe there really is a message in there for all of us. Because all of us have barriers,

whether it's aging or something else. To be successful, we need to compensate. We need to get over, get under, get through or get around our barriers. That's what these people were doing. Despite physical and mental limitations, they persevered. They were not deterred. They continue to produce.

And production can seemingly continue in physical domains, too. The Wander Women are in their 70s and still knocking down hikes of 2,000 miles or more. When asked about their physical limitations, they said, "Maybe you used to run a six-minute mile, and now you run a 12-minute mile. OK, so what? A 12-minute mile is still fine. It still gets you where you want to go. It's still healthy. It's still fun." My hunch is that former elite athletes probably feel the same way. Although their talents have eroded, they can continue to play and enjoy their sport at some level.

How do you think you might apply these lessons to your own life?

I'm 68, and I am contemplating official retirement. But I love what I'm doing, it's my bliss, and it's likely that I'm going to continue to write and produce in my [retirement](#) years. It's just that some of that writing is likely to move outside educational psychology.

Whatever directions and projects I pursue, I'm inspired and guided by the Wisdom Years people who joyfully continue to produce at high levels and seemingly slow the aging clock.

More information: Kenneth A. Kiewra et al, Moving Beyond Fulfillment: Wisdom Years Stories of Passion, Perseverance, and Productivity, *Educational Psychology Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10648-023-09747-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09747-z)

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Citation: Interviews with icons yield lessons on productivity in 'Wisdom Years' (2023, March 30)
retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-03-icons-yield-lessons-productivity-wisdom.html>

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