Folklife Well Seasoned

End-of-Life Approaches & Traditions of Elders Living Alone
Introduction
The landscape that defines quality in end of life is evolving rapidly in the United States. In 2014, the Southwest Folklife Alliance launched research across Southern Arizona’s ethnic and alternative communities, seeking to illuminate the everyday impact of cross-cultural perspectives on grief, trauma and death in our communities. Each year since then, our “citizen folklorist” Continuum program has documented touch points that help us in diverse ways through end-of-life hurdles. One common hurdle is loneliness. The dilemma of social disconnect brings us to new questions involving elderly isolation in end of life, and it is a motivating part of our community fieldwork this year.

SFA collaborated with Our Family Services’ Center for Community Dialogue to ask how cultural life approaches of elders living alone might positively transform end-of-life experiences. Because food is such an important cultural enabler, we use the goodness of a shared meal to discuss approaches associated with end of life and draw attention to our interconnected narratives.

We hope these shared reflections build a sense of belonging in end of life for elder persons who live alone and open doors to understanding more about our personal folklife – a treasure that often lies hidden.

— Dr. Maribel Alvarez
Gardens: Connectors to Community

Gardening is a tradition with magic influence in elder lives. It also may evolve into interpersonal connections within community, as demonstrated in places like Tohono Chul Park, where tending gardens is a vehicle of stewardship that inspires nurturing qualities and is symbolic of wisdom.

“Gardening builds community? Yes, but gardening is also for the solo traveler,” says Tohono Chul Park Director of Education Jo Falls. “I see it as the opportunity for anyone to reconnect with the world outside themselves. Getting your hands dirty, showing patience and perseverance, and finally being rewarded with the joy of seeing something grow, something that you had a hand in creating.”

Gardens tell us a lot about ourselves, Jo continues. “I wasn’t really a gardener as a child, other than raking and burning leaves or cutting the grass,” she recalls. “Even now my gardening is sporadic and haphazard. I put in sturdy plants with the admonition that they be able to survive the heat and cold and up to two weeks with no liquid sustenance. I have also turned to more potted things and especially those without spines.”

Jo recommends to old gardeners and anyone: “A Full Life in a Small Space” by Janice Emily Bowers.
For Dolores “Del” Jones, founder of Elder Circles in Tucson, “aging consciously” began with listening and sharing in intimate conversation circles. In 2005, after reading Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s “From Age-Ing to Sage-Ing,” Del presented the concept of Elder Circles in Tucson to a woman’s spirituality group. After collaborating with others, Del then created Elder Circles – offering monthly gatherings across Tucson, to give elders a safe venue to discuss their lives and share their legacy in a facilitated format, in individual journeys to conscious aging.

The program grew and in 2012, Elder Circles moved under the umbrella of the Center for Community Dialogue, a program of Our Family Services.

Del – recognized in 2015 as Arizona Volunteer of the Year for her invaluable contributions to elder wellness in Tucson – passed away on July 8, 2017, at the age of 90.

Today, many consider the circles their community, with shared practices. Elder Circles now exist across North, Northwest, Northeast and Central Tucson, as well as in Oro Valley, Green Valley and for the LGBTQ community. An Elder Circle for seniors living alone without a family support system is now in development.
While most of us seek community in a geographical place – digital space provides those without traditional place-based systems a way to “live tribally.”

Carol Marak, founder of a closed Facebook group for seniors over 55 living alone, is a Texan, in her mid-sixties, involved in the aging industry more than a decade. She is divorced, with no children. She considers herself an “elder orphan” and does not use the phrase lightly. It signifies for her both the vulnerability felt by the many without a family support system, and the hope that is shaped through the closed Facebook group created for seniors living alone.

As caregiver for both her parents, Carol learned quickly about the demands of aging in end of life. Once her parents had died, Carol turned around and asked herself, “Now, what about me?”

Carol started her closed Facebook group last year with a small group of friends. At first it was just congenial sharing of current events and lifestyle tips. Since last September, Carol’s group has skyrocketed, with membership above 6,000.

About 92 percent of the group is female, with the majority based in the United States,
although there also are Canada and UK members. Diverse ethnic backgrounds and professions are represented.

Regularly, the group tackles serious discussions – about paying for medications, finding affordable housing, overcoming loneliness, handling money and end of life issues.

“We discuss selecting health care proxies, how to complete DNRs, what to do about arranging funerals,” Carol says. “We also talk about how we want to die. Some say they share these thoughts with their doctors, but others haven’t had the conversation.”

But it’s not all about serious issues. She notes how the storytelling about personal traditions brings positive light to the group. “We talk about our favorite music and bucket lists.”

They share canning tips and play games together, online.

Food is a hot topic. Everyone contributes family recipes. When the holidays come, members who are eating alone take photos of their holiday meals and post to the group.

Several in the group are gathering offline to build a place-based group of support.

Society has changed. We’re no longer all married with 2.5 children, with a family to care for us when we get older, says Carol, who continues: “Our path into this ‘group’ may be through personal choice or circumstances beyond our control, but the light is now shining on our issues, and that includes end of life challenges.”

Field note:
There are always unknowns in a community, but something SFA folklorists found surprising about the Facebook group is how much remembering is not about the past, which may conjure up sadness. The group looks to making memories in the present. “Striving to remember goodness in life, in the fullness of the here and now,” is how one Facebook member describes it.
The power of remembrance, involving foods, music and those who have died, is evident in anchoring meaning for the Facebook group. Here are 3 recollections submitted:

Sugar Cookies

“Thank you for asking about family recipes! I dug thru my saved "heritage recipe book" and found my moth- er's Sugar Cookie recipe (hand written by her!) I had a good cry. Love my mom and miss her so much…”

FB Informant “A”

Pierogi & Sauerkraut

"Making pierogi with the entire family, cheese, potato, sauerkraut (is what I remember). What a mess and a lot of work, but at that time, you could not buy them in the store."

FB Informant “B”

Navy Beans & Cornbread

"Sitting around a wood burning stove with my mother and siblings eating Navy beans and cornbread and watching Gunsmoke! To date many evenings my meal is Navy beans and cornbread…"

FB Informant “C”
The Informants interviewed by SFA have shaped their own voice in narrating culture. SFA was not surprised that the Informants resisted a stereotypical vision of the solo senior. Particularly in end of life, the Informants believe each individual needs to speak to her/his own definition of human truth, and the way to make sense of life’s journey.

Informant “DK” is 72 years old, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, a Tucson author and life transitions coach, with deep roots in the Northeast. She has a treasured family camp in New Hampshire that goes back three generations, and she travels to this camp each summer, reconnecting with family and nature. She moved to Tucson about 10 years ago.

Informant “Rachel” was born in 1946, in Cincinnati, with Jewish grandparents who migrated from Europe in the early 1900s. An only child, she never married. She was educated in design and took her MFA and graphics career around the country. She moved to Tucson in 2002.
Main Dish cont.

Is a discussion of end of life a taboo or uncomfortable discussion for you?

Informant “DK” Every time we lose someone we think about death in a different way. I am pretty informed and comfortable with these discussions after several years of having them. They are part of life. My relationship with death is constantly changing ... with every person or animal being I have loved and lost.

Informant “Rachel” In my family of origin, no one ever spoke of death even when they were dying. When someone died, there was a funeral and that was the end of it. It was like they were erased. Growing up, I found all the secrecy very disturbing. I’m sure this behavior was a means of coping. Still, life is not about coping; it’s about living: Getting everything out in the open works better for me.

What do you think the consequences are, when we ignore our cultural traditions?

Informant “DK” I imagine a deep sense of disconnectedness. I return to a summer camp full of family and tradition, and my heart would be broken when it is no longer there. It is full of ritual and tradition and feeds my soul.

Informant “Rachel” Thinking about consequences isn’t very life-affirming. A lot has been written about the life-enhancing effects of having a strong social network. Seniors who can make claim to one live longer and have healthier lives. As long as I have the physical stamina to get up and go, I plan to do just that.
What can you share about your routines that bring you comfort?

Informant “DK” Because I am a “solo senior” - never married - no kids - I have always realized the importance of community. I couldn’t do this life alone. So, I have built in community. I attend Quaker meetings. I have Elder Circle (See Resource Listing). I have always been committed to maintaining positive relations with others, especially single women. My volunteer work must meet my needs for community by providing opportunities to relate to others in an honest, respectful and authentic way.

Informant “Rachel” As a retiree, I see my life now as one of service – giving back. Volunteering gives my life meaning and dignity. I feel fortunate to be living in a town with wonderful events and resources and opportunities for connecting with other people. I enjoy getting out independently and being able to meet and converse with people of all ages and backgrounds. My daily rituals might include walking, meditation, yoga and listening to NPR.

Main Dish cont.

Do you have notions of a good death? What might the components be?

Informant “DK” At the moment I believe I want to be with someone when I die. Perhaps to look in the eyes of someone as I let go of this life. I usually think of myself hopefully dying with some loved ones, friends around me.

Informant “Rachel” I don’t know what a good death is and I have a little trouble getting my brain wrapped around not existing anymore. I believe if I feel content with my life, I will pass on easily and effortlessly. We always hear the line, “Life is short.” Actually, I experience life as long. I’ve had a long full life, but I’m not done.
Resources

Aging: PCOA is Pima County’s designated Area Agency on Aging: www.pcoa.org
PCOA Helpline: 520-790-7262
End of Life Specialist: 520-546-2016

Housing Alternatives: Local network for sharing and/or matching up living resources, for elders living alone: Elder Living Outside the Box: possslq.com

End of Life Care Partnership: newly launched website for local resources involving end of life: azendoflifecare.org

Newsletter: Age With Purpose, by Carol Marak: seniorcare.com/newsletter/

Facebook Closed “Elder Orphan” Group: www.seniorcare.com/resources/elder-orphan-resources/

Solo Senior Workshop by JFCS of SoAz: Dec. 8th, 10 am, Wilmot Library. Contact Elise Bajohr: 520-795-0300

Info About Ethical Wills: jfcstucson.org/services/

Elder Circles: For more information on these free monthly meetings to explore life issues in a facilitated, non-judgmental group setting: Call 520-323-1708 x122.

Fieldnotes: EOL traditions and folklife experiences of seniors living alone: southwestfolklife.org/continuum/
This booklet is part of the Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum Program – an ethnographic documentation of expressive practices in Southern Arizona communities as they relate to end of life.

The program is supported by: The Community Foundation for Southern Arizona, Shaaron Kent Endowment Fund and The David and Lura Lovell Foundation.

SFA’s Community Host: Center for Community Dialogue, Our Family Services

Editor: Maribel Alvarez, Ph.D.
Managing Editor: Monica Surfaro Spigelman
Program Ethnographers: Natalie Brown, Leia Maahs, Catherine Tornbom
Designer: Alex Jimenez
Continuum Cohort: Jo Falls, Marni Farrell, Deborah Knox, Carol Marak