

COMMENTARY

Coronavirus epidemic is putting Gen X in spotlight



"(Social distancing has) been a breeze for me, but then again, like a lot of Gen Xers I know, I don't have kids. Corraling the boomer parent, however!" says Cleveland artist Arabella Proffer. *John Petkovic, The Plain Dealer*

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The media literally disappeared Generation X.

In a much-talked-about CBS story last year about "Generation Guidelines," the story and chart leapt from baby boomers (born 1946 to '64) to millennials (born '81 to '96). We didn't even warrant a mention.

But the generation of 66 million Americans born 1965 to 1980 is used to it. Sandwiched between the two much larger demographics of boomers and millennials, we're accustomed to being an afterthought.

Our music and art spoke of alienation and disaffection, from grunge to hip-hop, to the films of Richard Linklater and Sofia Coppola and Christopher Nolan. "Reality Bites" wasn't just a movie, it was a belief. We've been written off as insignificant and slackers.

Until now.

The coronavirus epidemic is putting Gen X in the spotlight, for good reason. While millennials and Gen Z kept partying and going to the beach, and boomers who didn't want to recognize they are not so young anymore kept brunching, Gen X stood up and took action — and stayed in.

Hey, we're the first generation of latchkey kids and widespread divorce; we know a little something about fending while home alone.

Of course, now we are not alone. Many of us are parents of school-age children we are now homeschooling while we work from home, if we have not lost our jobs (82% of Gen Xers are in the workforce). Many in Gen X also have aging parents to worry about and assist, even if done at a social distance.

"We got named the slacker generation; I would hope this is proving that wrong," says Cleveland Heights Realtor and mother of three Sionann Monroe. "I don't know if we were ever so much slackers as much as go-with-the-flow," she adds. "I certainly don't feel like a slacker now."

She, like many other Cleveland Gen Xers, thinks our generation is particularly well-suited to dealing with coronavirus ramifications such as social distancing.

"We were definitely less connected. I can't tell you how many nights I spent in my room listening to Cure records in the dark. I didn't have a car until I was 21. I was a latchkey kid 100%. There was a kind of, 'If you want something done, do it yourself' attitude.

"My boomer parents are still very active, doing things they knew they were not supposed to until recently. I had to encourage them to do that. I was like, 'Mom, stop making me the bad guy. I'm already the bad guy for three other people.'" She's not alone in her analysis.

"I have been thinking about this a lot lately," says Lakewood resident Dana Aronovich. "I rewatched 'Reality Bites' and read Douglas Coupland's 'Generation X' a few months ago to prepare for writing an essay collection about being a Gen Xer who never really felt like one until recently. ... Working in a university with millennials and Zers really helped me see how different Gen X is and how we need to be the voice of reason — a weird concept for the too-cool-for-school generation."

Middleburg Heights teacher Mary Duganier Sholtis is one of many in the generation dealing with helping both children and a parent.

"I'm teaching middle-school English online all day while making sure my own kids do their work, and taking care of my Sicilian baby boomer mom who is recovering from a broken femur and living with us. And if one more person in this house of five asks me what I'm cooking for dinner, I'm going to lose it! But hey, I'm a Gen Xer. I can handle it."

"My biggest challenge is trying to keep my dad at home, and not to take my disabled and immune-compromised mom out of the house," says Laura Kreuzer Howard of Parma. "Their favorite activity was going out to eat with friends and family. I almost cried with joy when the restaurants closed."

Gen X has lived through a lot that may help them deal with today's situation. Not only did divorce rates rise dramatically in the 1970s, Gen X grew up with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Challenger explosion — which many of us watched live in school — the Los Angeles riots and the crack and AIDS epidemics.

"As a Gen Xer, latchkey kid and only child raised by a divorced mom, I feel as though I can power through damn near anything at this point," says Jessica Roach Manko.

"First, drugs were going to kill us — nope. Then heavy



"Case of Kraft mac-and-cheese and some Ramen, and I am all set," says musician Charlie Mosbrook. *Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer*

metal was going to make us kill ourselves — nope. AIDS was going to kill ALL of us — nope. I am not taking COVID-19 lightly by any means, but I feel like it is another thing we are going to experience and live through ... again."

Being a largely forgotten generation may be working in Generation X's favor. We didn't have helicopter parents, and we came of age at a time when working conditions were far less ideal than for boomers.

"We're used to not being the priority or indulged," says Delilah Onofrey.

"When it was our turn at the buffet, just scraps stuck to the pans were left. No nice pensions, or benefits, etc. No one cared if we were bored as kids. No one took an interest in our schoolwork either."

Generation X may have more reason than many to be pessimistic at the moment. In a 2018 Pew Charitable Trusts Survey of American Family Finances, nine out of 10 Gen Xers reported holding debt, the most of any generation (including the most mortgage debt). Some members are still paying off student loans, as their own children approach college age. But we're used to keeping on.

"Gen X has always done whatever it takes to get through the day," add Holly Braschwitz. "We don't fuss, just carry on."

Some Gen Xers, aka the MTV Generation, are embracing technology they didn't have, however.

"I am on the cusp of technically being a Gen Y, but I identify more with Gen X. I'm 37, born in '83. Anyway, having grown up without texting, Netflix, Facebook and WiFi, I feel very fortunate to have all those tools during this" pandemic, says Jessica Stockdale.

"I keep telling my nephews that if this happened when I was a kid, the only outside contact we'd have with friends is by phone ... one phone attached to the wall that I'd have to share with my two sisters and their grandparents," says Cleveland marketing consultant Angie Hetrick.

"While I feel for them, they have so many ways to interact with friends, from video chat to multiplayer online games. My childhood definitely prepared me to self-soothe and occupy. Using this time to make new recipes, organize the house and get ahead of spring tasks."

Still, others are returning to an old standby: telephone calls.

"(Social distancing has) been a breeze for me, but then again, like a lot of Gen Xers I know, I don't have kids. Corraling the boomer parent, however!" says Cleveland artist Arabella Proffer.

"But I intend to maybe go back to burning incense and listening to all my B-sides. I've also already had many long phone calls with friends; remember those? You know, since I can't go to a rave in an abandoned factory."

Gallows humor can be seen in every generation, but perhaps we moody, Goth- and grunge-loving, plunked-in-front-of-the-TV '80s kids may be especially good at it.

"Case of Kraft mac-and-cheese and some Ramen, and I am all set," says musician Charlie Mosbrook.

MOVIE REVIEW

'Crip Camp' tracks origins of disability rights movement

Katie Walsh *Tribune News Service*

It's hard to describe the sheer power of "Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution," a documentary that traces the DNA of the disability rights movement to a Catskills summer camp that hosted disabled kids from the 1950s to the 1970s. Co-directed by former camper Jim Lebrecht (with Nicole Newnham), and the winner of the documentary Audience Award at this year's Sundance Film Festival, "Crip Camp" uses archival footage shot at Camp Jened during the summers of 1970-72 by the People's Video Theater, as well as interviews with campers to craft a portrait of summer camp days. It evolves into the riveting tale of a decadeslong radical revolution that changed the world forever.

REVIEW

Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution

Who: Directed by Jim Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham

Rating: R for some language including sexual references;

Running time: 104 minutes.

Where: Now playing on Netflix.

Grade: A

Lebrecht serves as a guide on this story of activism sparked at a humble utopia outside Woodstock. A wheelchair user born with spina bifida, Lebrecht attended the camp as a teenager, in search of the classic teenage experience one might find with a bunch of hippies in the Catskills: make-outs, singalongs and smoking cigarettes. It's the normalcy of it all that made Jened such a radical place. It was just like any other camp, with dances, baseball games, messy bunks and flirtations, as well as wheelchair-accessible buildings and compassionate care for all bodies. The campers were treated not as different or challenging, but just like any other teens, without pity, condescension or confusion, just basic respect and humanity in an environment built for them to access, which shamefully was not the case in the United States at that time.

Just letting the teens be teens, the culture of the place is one of radical inclusion and democracy. Each camper is always granted a chance to speak, no matter their ability, because all their voices matter. No longer relegated to special ed classes or institutions, their personalities and skills emerge, like Judy Heumann, a natural leader who skillfully marshals her fellow campers to organize a lasagna night and offers diplomatic comments on the crabs outbreak. Finally given a taste of true equality, revolution starts to rumble in the wilderness. As Lebrecht comments, Camp Jened gave them something tangible to hope and work for. "What we saw at that camp was that our lives could be better, you don't have anything to strive for if you don't know that it exists."

After the campers moved on into the world, the rubber really met the road with the extraordinary movement started by Heumann and much of her cohort from Camp Jened in working for equal rights for disabled individuals. The film documents the stunning 26-day sit-in that Heumann and her fellow activists undertook at a San Francisco federal building to demand that Health, Education, and Welfare department head Joseph Califano sign Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act. It would radically reshape our civil landscape, enshrining the rights of disabled folks into law for the first time, expanding job opportunities and requiring accessibility for buildings and transit.

This powerful protest was physically and mentally challenging for so many of the protesters. But it was also deeply empowering, and a decisive first milestone in the eventual road to the signing of the American Disability Act in 1990. Lebrecht and Newnham skillfully thread this civil rights movement back to its beginnings at Camp Jened, a place that was radical simply because it was so normal, where camp director Larry Allison dared to imagine a place where disability was just a part of daily life.



"Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution" is now available on Netflix.

Steve Honisgbaum/Netflix via AP