The experience of delving into the world of the disabled, albeit for only a few hours, was remarkably compelling and thought provoking. Our cogent but limited experience did not touch on other weighty issues faced by the disabled such as the difficulties of finding employment or attaining a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

The pressing need for accommodating the needs of the disabled is patently clear. My only evidence of society obliging the blind was the chattering pedestrian crossing boxes... although even these revealed dangerous shortcomings. The experiences of colleagues who assumed other disabilities testify that the inadequacies span the disabled community.

The resolve and achievements of the disabled reflect the indomitable human spirit and its capacity to adapt, overcome and succeed. But all too evident is the degree to which social interaction impacts on our lives. The blind, along with other physically disabled, can adapt and cope with awe-inspiring proficiency in a physical world so deficient in its design for their minority. The valued traits of autonomy and independence, which are crucial to self-esteem, can be acquired. But the response of the able-bodied community is beyond their control.

Sympathy and wanton attention are not required. The very term “handicapped” is infused with connotations of sympathy and dependency. Shaking off this image is, in itself, a virtually insuperable task.

Previously, my encounters with the disabled elicited momentary feelings of sympathy for the other’s misfortune, and relief in the soundness of the body that was propelling me past the unfortunate soul and away from this source of unease. Or, alternatively, there was awe at this peculiar being striding purposefully and adroitly behind his probing cane.

This experience has shifted those feelings towards an appreciation of the human, inviolate and undiminished, extricated from the disability; a human, whose biggest impediment is not the frailty of his body or the hostility of the physical world, but the failure of his fellow man to recognise him as one and the same.

Is Late-Life Creativity a Possibility for All?

Aoife Lally, 6th Year Medicine

As a medical student nearing the end of her studies at college, I am frequently asked what area I would like to specialise in after graduating. When I reply - Medicine for the Elderly - it is quite often greeted with a mixed response, which can sometimes be very positive but more often than not includes shock, surprise and a great demand for an explanation as to why. I have noticed that this reaction is not usual for classmates of mine to receive, who express an interest in, for instance, Paediatrics or Cardiology.

Could it be that care of children is seen by the public to be worthwhile and rewarding while care of the elderly a waste of time, energy and resources? This despite the fact that more and more people are living longer. The US Bureau of the Census in 1993 revealed that about one out of nine people over 65 years of age has a child who is also at least 65 years old. At the moment 11.4% of the population of Ireland is over the age of 65 and will increase to 14.1% by 2011.1 Demographic forces would seem to be more favourable to the prospective geriatrician than the prospective paediatrician.

Sadly it seems to me that ageism knows no barriers and even educated individuals may sometimes doubt the abilities of older people. The demographic case has been well established regarding the increasing population of older individuals and the benefits that specialised care of this group can bring have been proven.2 Why therefore is there such reluctance among many to enter a career in Medicine for the Elderly?

Geriatricians dread Shakespeare and the continuous quotation of lines such as “When age is in, wit is out”. However, he was only reflecting a widespread...
and negative view. So many people have a pessimistic attitude about their future old age, especially when they think about their future cognitive function. In China where there is a strong cultural respect for the elderly and their wisdom, memory differences between healthy elderly and young adults are not observed in studies, which have been carried out. In the US, most of the tests measuring cognitive differences between elderly and young adults have been conducted in the afternoon, which is a time when the elderly are less alert due to their sleep patterns. It was found that this difference could be reduced by 50% when the same tests are given in the morning. As revealed by a Harris poll taken in the USA in 1981, the general public’s expectations of serious problems in old age were much worse than the actual problems experienced by the elderly themselves. For example, almost 70% of people aged 18-64 expected to suffer from poverty and loneliness on reaching old age, while less than 20% of people older than 65 reported having such problems.

Is it possible that there could be any basis for the ageist attitudes, which exist, in the youth-orientated culture of today? Are older people really a burden on society, with no chance of making any contribution and therefore in some way partly deserving of the negative attitudes piled against them? This prejudice and discrimination is evident in many television programmes and films where older characters (if they are present at all) are usually foolish and eccentric or grumpy and stubborn as seen in the Victor Meldrew character in *One Foot In The Grave*. Negative attitudes about older people can often begin to be formed in early childhood with children’s fairy tales often portraying older people as evil witches, poor beggars or village idiots. A review of 2500 fairy tales from around the world found that only 2% featured older people who were happy, healthy, wise or productive. This is a far cry from the true picture where 95% of the older population live in the community and over half report to be in good or very good health.

Perhaps an overlooked aspect is the preservation and maturing of creativity in later life. Innumerable contributions to society have been made in the past and continue to be made by older artists, musicians, actors and politicians, amongst others. For example, Michelangelo was the chief architect of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome from the age of 71 until his death at 89. Richard Strauss wrote the opera *Capriccio* when he was 77 and his second Horn Concerto a year later. At the age of 80, comedian George Burns won an Oscar and his career continued for another 20 years. Benjamin Franklin negotiated the peace settlement with England to end the American Revolutionary War at the age of 75. Just last year John Glenn orbited the earth at the age of 77, renewing his astronaut career after 36 years. Even age-related disease can be overcome – the dementia of de Kooning, or the myopia of the great Franco-Flemish Ockeghem who used spectacles in the 14th Century. Had Elgar’s depression not followed the death of his wife Caroline in 1920, his creativity may not have been so bluntly halted.

But how much relevance does this bear for the ordinary person on the street? Can somebody suddenly start using previously untapped skills late in life? Anna Mary Moses started painting rural scenes in oils at the age of 78 when her fingers became too stiff to embroider. She then gained international acclaim as Grandma Moses. How many more Grandma Moses’ are there who have yet to be discovered or given a little encouragement in the right direction? Do the opportunities exist for people to explore their unknown talents once they have reached a certain age and are considered by many to be past it?

In April of this year I visited the Irish Museum of Modern Art where an exhibition titled “...*and start to wear the colour purple*” was on display. This was a collection of artwork from the museum’s Education and Community Programme for older people. I particularly enjoyed the “Ribbons of Life” 1993 display where ten women from a local group expressed their personal life histories through wall hangings. Each wall hanging was a tapestry of memories which brought the onlooker on a journey through the significant events which had taken place in each artist’s life - from early childhood through to marriage and having children ending in some instances in sad images portraying death of a loved one. The overriding theme, despite the presence of some sad images, was one of a real celebration of life, which was evident from the bright colours used, and the emphasis that was placed on happy times. The wall hangings brought out some skills which the women had acquired early on in their lives - knitting, sewing etc., but involved employing them in a very imaginative and creative fashion rather than the practical applications which they had, in the past, been reserved for. For these women the museum had provided the first opportunity for them to express themselves and explore skills, such as painting, that had never been nurtured previously. Most of these women had left school at an early age either to start working in order to add to their family’s income or to look after younger siblings at home. They had all been married and had dedicated their lives to looking after their children and husbands with very little time to spare a thought for themselves.

There has been a very strong relationship between the Museum of Modern Art and an active retirement association in the local community since before the museum opened to the public over eight years ago. The active retirement association painting group from the Inchicore area of
Dublin, in which all but one member had never painted before, participated in the museum’s inaugural exhibition “Inheritance & Transformation”. The group meets every week at the museum. Retirement and the reduced dependency of their now grown-up children on them has resulted in more free time in which new hobbies and interests can be pursued. People in the group talk with enthusiasm about creating their own paintings and with excitement about the discovery of their latent talents. Some speak with regret about the discovery, which has come about late in life because the opportunities were never there in the past due to their limited schooling, lack of financial resources and social circumstances. As one woman put it - “the contact with the Museum has shown that we have learned to accept challenges and that we are capable of a lot more than we ever dreamed”. For many the companionship, discussions and learning opportunities provided by the weekly meetings are far more important than the completion of a painting. For example, one member said - “I get more pleasure out of it being part of the group than just painting on my own at home”.

Others talk of seeing the world in a different light and noticing things which they just hadn’t seen in the past as well as the large sense of fulfilment and achievement which accompanies the completion of a painting.

It is therefore possible for people to make new discoveries about previously unleashed talents and develop new interests and hobbies late in life. As a new millennium approaches, there is still a lot of work to be done so that younger members of the community may begin to change some of their negative opinions and pre-formed notions about old age and barriers to late life creativity may be destroyed. It is also important that the various projects, which are currently happening throughout the country, be multiplied so that all older people - not just those who have energetic and enthusiastic local active retirement groups, or those who live a stone’s throw away from our capital’s museums and art galleries – may have access to creative opportunities. One wonders whether, if W. B. Yeats were around in the Ireland of today, he would still feel

“An aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
I wish to thank Dr. Desmond O’Neill for his help with the writing of this essay.

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